



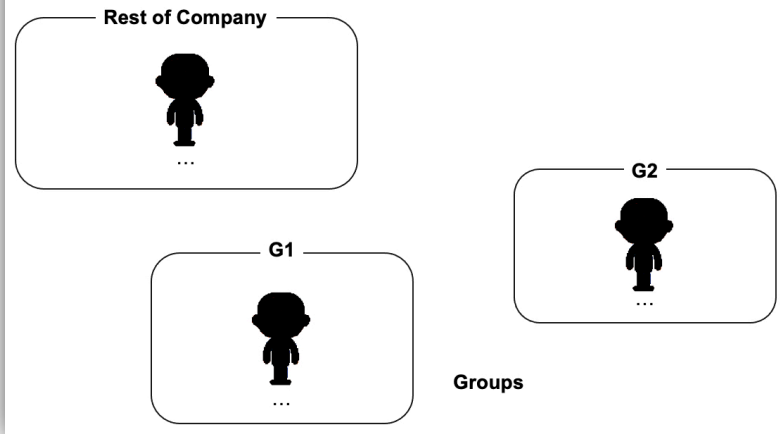
Difficult Conversations

Full example script & learning points

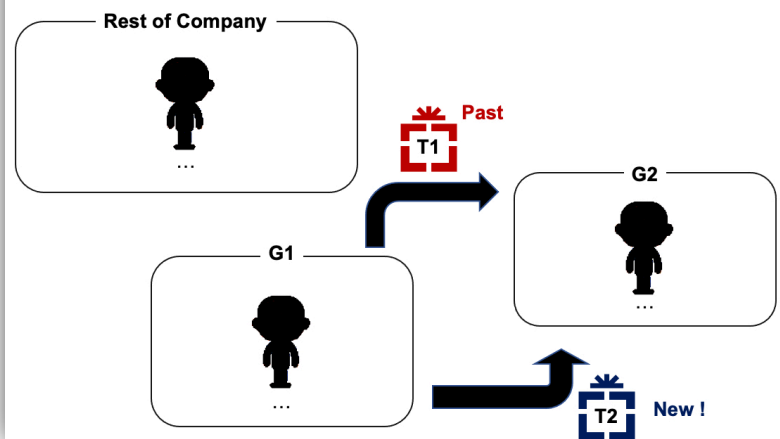
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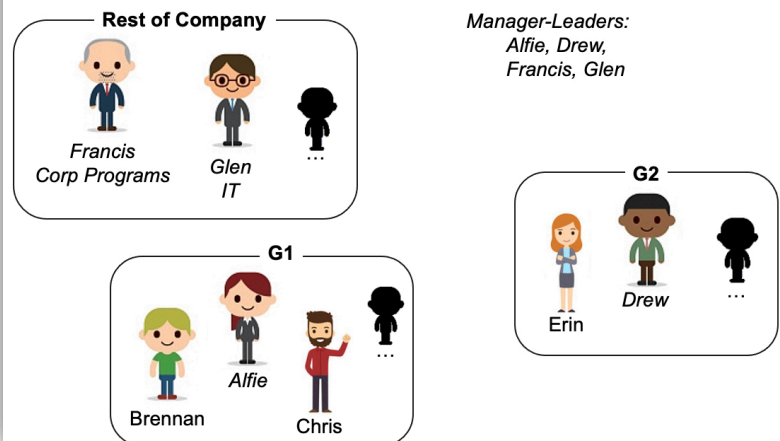
Organisations



Things (products, services)



People



Backdrop

G1 currently has several Things in production and has recently developed T2. They believe that it has huge potential and wish to promote it to G2, for use in their products and services. This would mean revenue for G1 and it would also validate T2, giving it credibility and helping it to succeed in other markets.

G2 is already using T1, an older Thing from G1, though the experience of integrating it was an unhappy one. There were delays and relations between the two groups became strained.

Cast of characters

(names below are *unisex*)

1. Alfie : Brennan's and Chris's boss (Manager-Leader in G1)

Whenever you take this role, you play it as yourself.

2. Brennan : An Engineer (Individual Contributor in G1 – reports to Alfie)

Whenever you take this role, you play it as yourself.

3. Chris : An Engineer (Individual Contributor in G1 – reports to Alfie)

Very competent though always joking about, trying to do many things at once, rarely on time.

4. Drew : Erin's boss (Manager-Leader in G2)

Conscientious. Holds strong views on *how* things should be done but is more flexible on *what* should be done.

5. Erin : An Engineer (Individual Contributor in G2 – reports to Drew)

Technocratic, logical, organized. Can be impatient with others who do not see things as clearly as them.

6. Francis : A Corporate Program Manager (Manager-Leader in Rest of Company)

Results-oriented. Charming and persuasive. Has a tendency to push people into competitive positions (i.e. slightly manipulative).

7. Glen : An IT Engineer (Manager-Leader in Rest of Company)

Technically masterful. Tormented by conflicting desires for speed and perfection.

PLEASE NOTE: The list of scenes and the characters that play in them is given on the last page.

Scene 1: Refusing politely

Setting

Alfie has been working on a presentation for an important meeting with G2 for the past three weeks. He sent Francis a complete version, for checking, two weeks ago and has been regularly mailing and calling him to ask for feedback. Francis has been unresponsive.

The meeting in question is tomorrow and it's 6pm when Francis calls ...

Characters

Alfie, Francis

Dialog

Francis

Hi Alfie, do you have a minute?

Alfie

Sure, I'm just finishing up for the day, but I've got a few minutes. What's up?

Francis

I just went through the presentation that you sent me for the inter-group call tomorrow. I like it a lot, but I think you should add backup slides with details of the T2 results that you told me about.

Alfie

Er Francis ... *[takes a few seconds to think]* ... before I answer, I've a question.

I'm not accusing, just a bit perplexed, and I'd like to clear the air before we talk about the details of the presentation. Is that Ok?

Francis

Sure. Is there a problem?

Alfie

Well, after I sent the slides a couple of weeks ago, I sent at least 2 emails and left a voicemail.

Did you get these messages?

Francis

Yes, I think so. But I've been so busy that I've just not had time for this. Sorry!

Alfie

Ok. I guess I was expecting you to jump on the slides as soon as I sent them, and that wasn't realistic ;-)

No problem.

Now, about the presentation ...

... The current PPT has 14 or 15 slides. We agreed three weeks ago that we'd concentrate on the business case for T2 and leave the detail for another meeting. In fact, the objective we defined was just to get another meeting with G2 so that we could discuss details and get their agreement.

I'm annoyed, because I can see the sense in having these backup slides. But I don't have time to do them :-)

It's 6pm and I promised to get home by 6:30 today, which I'd really like to do.

What other options do you have?

Francis

None, really. But it shouldn't take you long. Don't you have some material that you could throw together quickly?

Alfie

I don't have any slides at the ready and so I would have to start from scratch.

I'm afraid that my answer is 'no', Francis. I'm not prepared to work on this tonight.

Francis

What about Brennan? Could you get them to do something?

Alfie

My policy with the team is to never ask them to do something that I would not be prepared to do myself.

I believe that this is an important principle and so I don't want to ask him to spend an evening on unexpected work because I don't want to.

Francis

So what can we do then?

Alfie

Well ... [thinking] ... Brennan will be in the meeting and I've seen them improvise a convincing whiteboard presentations in the past.

I could talk to Brennan about the potential need for some whiteboarding first thing tomorrow, so that they have some time to think about. That would be a decent backup.

Francis

Hmm. That's not bad. Let's go with that then.

I was worried about what would happen if – by some miracle ☺ - we got to discussing project details tomorrow. But the Brennan whiteboard idea seems like a decent backup.

Thanks!

Alfie

No problem. Thanks for raising the issue. I agree with you that we should have a backup.

Francis

Ok, well, have a nice evening!

Alfie

You too!

Suggested learning points:

1. Alfie is annoyed because they haven't received feedback. It would be a bad idea to leave this annoyance untreated, so they move towards this difficulty (apparently identified when they pause before speaking). It would have been easy for Alfie to have avoided this difficulty, which they would have done if they had immediately focused on the request for changes to the slides.
2. To make sure that their intentions are clear, they explain them to Francis ('I'm not accusing, just ...'). This is a precaution - Alfie is concerned that, if they do not state their intention explicitly, then they might be misunderstood.
3. Having quickly explained their intent, Alfie takes a factual (unprovocative) approach to expressing their disappointment at not getting feedback from Francis, and this prompts an apology and an explanation (albeit a very unsurprising one!). Unsurprising or not, there is no evidence here that Francis has acted maliciously or that they repeatedly ignore Alfie, and so Alfie leaves it at that. It's ok.

Also (bonus learning points) ...

4. Alfie get's on to the main task of replying to Francis's request, starting with a factual description of the situation and going on to describe their feelings: 'I'm a bit annoyed, because ...'. Notice that, although Alfie says quite a lot, it contains nothing that is likely to upset in Francis - they simply describe things as they see them, trying to describe their feelings as accurately as they described the facts of the situation.
5. Alfie also describes their needs/wants/desires, 'I promised to get home by 6:30 today, which I'd really like to do. ...', thus completing the explanation of how they are feeling (emotions depend on how our view of a situation - our story - aligns or conflicts with our present needs) and helping the conversation to move towards a search for a solution (an outcome that will come closest to satisfying everyone's needs).
6. Alfie's request is simple, 'What other options do you have?'. Bearing in mind that Alfie wishes to refuse Francis's request, it may come as a surprise that the request isn't somewhat stronger: 'I hope you will understand if I refuse to stay late and work in the slides', for example. However, Alfie's first priority is to establish a healthy channel of communication and guide the conversation towards a search for other solutions. Later, they have to be make their refusal more explicit, but they are out of the most difficult part of the conversation by then.

Scene 2: Saying what you want

Setting

The quarterly inter-group operations review, chaired by Francis. There are about 20 senior people present in an atmosphere of inter-group politics and large egos.

Alfie's wants to get agreement for the use of T2 in G2 – this is the key message in their presentation (which Francis called about yesterday evening) .

However, it's late into this two-hour meeting and Alfie has not yet had a chance to talk about T2. Frustrated, Alfie decides to interrupt ...

Characters

Alfie, Francis, Drew (passive: about 20 Manager-Leaders from various groups)

Dialog

... the meeting is already underway as we join it ...

Francis

Moving on then, I'd like to hear from Nolan about their project. Nolan, what do you have for us please?

Alfie

Francis, could I just interrupt for a moment?

Francis

Sure, but please keep it quick as we only have twenty minutes left.

Alfie

Yes, of course. You see, G1 has a slot at the very end of this meeting and, since we are behind schedule, we're not going to be able to contribute if we continue with the original agenda.

But we'd like to share some news about T2. Please can we juggle things around so that we get our slot?

Francis

Hmm, I don't know. We must talk about Poseiden and the only other slot before yours is from G2.

Drew

Yes, and we've prepared stuff to talk about too ...

Francis

With all due respect Alfie, other groups have a much bigger revenue footprint than you guys and we need to hear from them.

Alfie

I appreciate that, and I promise to keep it short. Three minutes.

Francis

Two

Alfie

Thanks.

T2 development is a month ahead of schedule – 'internal beta' testing is complete and so, to avoid wasting this head-start, we need to start 'customer beta' deployment asap.

We know that we caused G2 some pain last year when they integrated T1, but we've learnt from that. I'm asking for a meeting where we can show you in detail what we've achieved recently and decide together whether a 'customer beta' makes sense.

Drew

How can G1 possibly support a new 'customer beta' when we are still sorting out the mess of the last one? Also, we don't know anything about T2.

Alfie

Agreed, and that is why I'm asking for a meeting.

Francis

It sounds reasonable Drew.

Drew

Ok, why not. Can we move on now? ...

... *the conversation continues* ...

Suggested learning points:

1. The meeting has not gone according to plan and Alfie's original objective (intention) of obtaining agreement from G2 for their use of T2 is no longer possible. Alfie therefore has to adjust their intention - getting a separate meeting with G2 is the obvious way to avoid the delay that would result from waiting for the next inter-group meeting.

Also (bonus learning points) ...

2. Alfie avoids interpretations. The meeting is not 'running very late', for example, it is behind schedule. T2 is not 'making great progress', it's development is ahead of schedule. The auto-config is not 'much faster' than in the past, it takes one week rather than a month.

3. Alfie makes the request as concise as possible using the absolute minimum information at first.

4. Alfie is guided by their objectives: they did not reply to the remarks made by Drew, they simply used them to reinforce the request for a meeting

Scene 3: Dealing with resistance

Setting

Alfie managed to schedule a meeting with G2 to discuss T2 deployment in their group.

We are in the requested G1-G2 meeting, discussing a possible T2 pilot project in G2.

The G2 people are wasting time, seeing more obstacles than opportunities, focusing on trivia and making it difficult for Alfie to talk about the main topic.

G1's objectives for the meeting are to obtain agreement for the pilot project or, if that is not possible, at least avoid a definitive 'no'.

Characters

Alfie, Erin, Drew (passive: other G1 and G2 people)

Dialog

... the meeting is already underway as we join it ...

Erin

If we start working with T2, we're going to have to update all our IT packages.

Drew (*worried tone*)

That would be a pain. We all know how long IT changes take ;-)

Erin

Do you know if Glen is going to be able to support us for the IT update?

Drew

I think so, but he was very cagey about when they could start.

'Only saw them for a couple of minutes, at the coffee station with Indigo.

Erin (*sarcastic*)

Ah-ha! The infamous Indigo. Well I just hope they don't get put on the job!

Drew

Indeed. The last time I met Indigo ...

Alfie

Drew, sorry to interrupt. Please can we get back to the main topic?

Drew

Yeah, sure.

As I was saying earlier, I can understand that you want to get T2 deployed, but we've enough problems to deal with right now, and we're short of resources.

Integrating new Things takes time – there are processes to follow ...

Erin (*a bit impatient*)

And I'd add, Drew, that we're still reeling from the problems we had integrating T1.

Alfie

So, if I understand correctly, you are unusually short of resources and a bit sore from our last adventure together 😊 Is that it?

Erin

Not only that. It's unclear what advantage we would get from integrating T2, even if we could do it.

Ok. And is there anything else that we should deal with, in addition to these three points?

Erin

They're the main ones, I guess.

Alfie

In that case, could I start by talking about the reasons why we think you'd benefit from doing an T2 pilot? I promise that we'll deal with resources and track record after.

Erin

Sure

Alfie

Thanks.

The key advantage for you is the speed with which you will be able to reconfigure T2 for new product variants. Compared to T1, this process is about 10x faster.

I've read that the Data Center market has become extremely competitive and so I imagine that you are under a lot of pressure to decrease time-to-market? ...

... *the conversation continues ...*

Suggested learning points and questions:

1. In the face of G2's problem orientation, stays focused on their objective.

2. G2's problem orientation is a sign of passive resistance, and so Alfie tries to understand and acknowledge people's concerns before attempting to put their own arguments.

Also (bonus learning points) ...

3. With their permission ('could I start by talking about ...'), Alfie guides the audience towards a topic that is future/solution-oriented), to get away from the resistance, problem focus and negativity.

4. Notice that, in this script, the resistance starts off as passive - talking about the wrong topic - then becomes active as soon as Alfie insists that they come back on topic.

5. Alfie is feeding information to Drew and Erin slowly, as the resistance gradually weakens.

6. What do you imagine would have happened if Alfie had made one big argument, listing several advantages for T2 all at once?

Scene 4: Expressing discontent

Setting

A few weeks later, Alfie has got agreement from G2 for a T2 pilot project.

That's great news, but Alfie then learns that entire the cost of the pilot, including G2's part, will be transferred to G1. This decision is irreversible and came about after negotiations between the CEO, the head of G2 and Francis, the Corporate Program Manager.

Alfie's just received this bad news. They're still furious when Francis calls about another matter ...

Characters

Alfie, Francis

Dialog

Francis

Hi Alfie, do you have a couple of minutes to talk about the schedule please?

Alfie

Hi Francis, sure. But there's something else that I'd like to deal with first.

I just learned that G1 has to pay for the T2 pilot – so G2 will cross-charge us for all their resources working on it. Is that right?

Francis

Yes, that's right. It was agreed by Giuseppe and Andreas on Tuesday night.

Alfie

G2 already has T1 and, according to the last figures I saw, they've sold over 50 million parts which include it. There must be something like \$20-30M of revenue attributable to our component in there, and there's more coming in every month.

We get 10% of the margin, and G2 takes 90%.

I'm angry and I'm suddenly much less confident in how this project is going to turn out.

It seems unfair to me that G1 be obliged to pay the whole cost of the pilot - and take all the risk - when G2 is likely to gain more than us if it succeeds.

I want to feel that we are working in partnership with G2 - that we have common goals and that we're tackling common obstacles together. Sharing the risks. Brothers in arms and all that.

I don't see this happening now.

What do you think of this point of view?

... *the conversation continues* ...

Suggested learning points and questions:

1. Alfie uses the 'classic' NVC protocol: factual situation/observations; problems/feelings; needs/wants; actions/request. In particular, for the 'observations' part, they avoid judgements, rules and suppositions.

Also (bonus learning points) ...

2. Alfie expresses emotion and explains where this emotion comes from: having summarised the factual situation as they see it, they describe their interpretation - it's unfair. The reason for Alfie's anger and drop in confidence becomes even clear when they explain their need for a partnership. Notice that all this is done without accusing anyone of anything. Hence, Alfie does not give Francis any reason to become defensive.

3. Given the above dialog, what do you think are Alfie's motives for tackling Francis about the cross-charging issue?

Scene 5: Pushing back

Setting

Now that G1 has agreement for the T2 pilot in G2, we are now in the heart of an G1 meeting to decide who will do what.

Chris, who has spent most of their 3 years in G1 focused on Things and who has worked more than anyone on T2, has just made a strong case for taking the lead role in the pilot. Brennan, who has been in G1 for 5 years and has experience not only of Things but of a range of other stuff, also wants to take the role.

Everyone in the meeting can sense the tension between these two colleagues.

Characters

Brennan, Chris (passive: Alfie and other G1 members)

Dialog

... the meeting is already underway as we join it ...

Chris

... and so I really think that I would be the best person to lead the pilot.

Brennan

I agree that, of all the people on the project, Chris has by far the most experience on T2.

At the same time, project leadership requires skills unrelated to the technical mission.

I've led a couple of pilot projects in the past and I'm interested in project management - I'm taking courses and reading stuff at the moment. And, although I've not got Chris's deep knowledge of T2, I have been working on Things for at least five years, and on other products.

I like it that Chris is motivated to run this project and (*turning to Chris*) I like working with you Chris. For this reason, I feel somewhat ambivalent in pushing back against your proposal.

However, I would prefer to take the lead for the pilot. I want to use and develop my non-technical skills, and I'm also keen to work with G2 and get to know more people in the company, outside of G1.

At the same time, it's important to me that we work well together. How would you feel about working with me as the lead?

... the conversation continues ...

Suggested learning points:

1. In the above dialog, Brennan uses the 'classic' NVC protocol: factual situation/observations; problems/feelings; needs/wants; actions/request. They avoid judgements, rules and suppositions.

Also (bonus learning points) ...

2. Brennan's trickiest task is probably identifying and expressing their real feelings.

3. If the dialog is re-read without the 4th paragraph ('I like it that Chris is motivated ...'), what is the effect?

Scene 6: Giving bad news

Setting

The issue of who would head up the T2 pilot was taken offline from the last meeting, and now Alfie has decided to give the role to Brennan.

Knowing that Chris is not going to like it, Alfie breaks the news ...

Characters

Alfie, Chris

Dialog

Alfie

Chris, can I have a word with you?

Chris

Sure.

Alfie

When you piped up in the meeting yesterday and asked for the lead of the pilot, I was pleased. However, I'm afraid that my decision has gone in Brennan's favour, even though you made a good case.

I imagine that you're disappointed?

Chris (*unhappily*)

I guess that's the word :-)

Alfie (*slightly playful*)

And there are others?

Chris

Well, I guess that I'm a bit pissed off too because, in spite of age and experience and everything, I don't see why Brennan will do a better job than I could.

Alfie

So would you like to know why I decided to give Brennan the lead?

Chris (*emphatically*)

Yes, I would!

Alfie

Well, I'm not going to talk about Brennan in his absence, as I like everyone in the team to know that I don't discuss them with their team-mates. It's a matter of principle for me. I don't talk to the others about you, and vice versa, ok?

Chris

Ok.

Alfie

Ok, so it comes down to why I don't think you're ready to lead a pilot yet.

The thing is, as far as I know, all your training and experience is in technology and, when I see you and listen to you, especially in meetings, I have the impression that you attach little importance to subjects that are non-technical.

Chris

I don't like bullshit, if that's what you mean.

Alfie

Are you accusing me of bullshitting you?

Chris

No, I'm just agreeing with you :-)

Alfie

I'm reassured then :-)

Now, to run a project, you have to be at ease handling, let's say, things that defy a simple answer ;-)
As I said, I was pleased when you made a bid for the project lead. I like working with people who have ambition, and I'd like to help you achieve this particular ambition the next time the chance comes up.

So, what's your take on working with issues where there's no simple answer?

... the conversation continues ...

Suggested learning point and questions:

- 1. Alfie avoids announcing the bad news brutally, without any preliminaries, but they don't delay unnecessarily either.*
- 2. It doesn't sound as though Alfie has prepared a speech! An opening phrase, maybe, but from then on they let things flow. Sometimes, following the NVC protocol step-by-step is just a Bad Idea!*
- 3. The last point notwithstanding, Alfie respects NVC principles to guide what they say: no suppositions, judgements or subjective rules; use of empathy to understand the other person's situation/perspective, problems/feelings and needs; endeavoring to accurately/truthfully express my own situation/perspective, problems/feelings and needs.*
- 4. Before explaining their reasons, Alfie checks that the other person wishes to hear them. If they don't do this, they may sound defensive - as though anxious to justify something.*

Scene 7: Facing irritation and anger

Setting

The project is underway and, inevitably, there are problems.

This is a weekly operations meeting. It's routine, but Drew seems to be upset about something.

The G1 team's objectives are simply to report progress and sync up with G2 and IT.

Characters

Brennan, Drew (passive: others from G1, G2 and Rest of Company)

Dialog

... the meeting is already underway as we join it ...

Brennan

Hi everyone. Sorry that I'm a bit late.

Drew (taciturn)

Hi Brennan. Glad that you've turned up.

You're late, for sure, but it's not just a couple of minutes that I'm worried about. Where's this release that you promised me? That's over a week now!

Brennan

There's no update since yesterday, and I think that you were copied on the mail?

Our best guess is the 17th.

Drew

BEST GUESS??! I've just about had enough of best guesses! Can't you guys do better than that?

This is a customer-facing project, I'd like to remind you. And it's our BU that's in the firing line!

IT'S NOT FRIGGING GOOD ENOUGH!

Brennan

Ok, I'm listening.

Drew (slightly calmer)

This is crazy, I can't keep going to my management and announcing new delays.

Brennan

Your boss is giving you a hard time?

Drew

Pressure is coming right down from the top. They're all getting jumpy about the customer seeing our dirty laundry ☹️

Brennan

Dirty laundry?

Drew

Well, I think my boss promised some kind of fancy project tracking, which we haven't got ;-)
His assistant then put together an Excel sheet and they're pushing me for data to fill it ☹ ☹

Brennan

Ouch! That must be uncomfortable.

Drew

Too right it is!! I hate this stuff.

... the conversation continues with Drew in a calmer mood ...

Suggested learning points:

- 1. Sometimes, there's nothing to do but listen and wait ('Ok, I'm listening').*
 - 2. Once Drew calms down slightly and it becomes possible, Brennan takes the opportunity to ask a question ('The boss is giving you a hard time?').*
 - 3. Until Drew calms down completely, so that they can resume a normal, professional conversation, all other objectives are put on hold.*
- Of course, this example is short. In real cases, it can take much longer for the conversation to get back to normal.*

Scene 8: Asking for more commitment

Setting

Later in the same weekly, Brennan raises some issues with IT.

It's something that Brennan has been worrying about and losing sleep over for a couple of weeks. Their patience with IT is wearing very thin.

Characters

Brennan, Glen (passive: Francis and others from G1 and G2)

Dialog

... we rejoin the meeting later on ...

Brennan

I'd like to talk about the beta that we requested a few meetings back.

Glen

I thought that was done now. You've had the release, haven't you?

I forget. Perhaps we sent it to G2 and not you?

Brennan

Indeed. G1 received the beta two days ago, on the 4th, whereas the original ETA was the 23rd.

However, our original request was for a synchronised release to G1 and G2, and this has not happened.

When I contacted IT about this, I discovered that different people were responsible for the G1 and G2 betas. And neither of them could tell me what were the plans of the other.

I am confused and worried that IT delays will become a critical issue. I'm also wondering if I have missed something.

Glen, please can you explain to us how this beta request is being handled in IT?

Glen

Well, we are very short of resources, and so I had to split the beta job across two people.

We're doing our best with what we've got!

Brennan

So what's happened. Have you lost people?

Glen

Not for good, but we have 2 people sick - quite seriously - and another on paternity leave, much earlier than expected.

Brennan *(listening empathetically)*

Anything else?

Glen

Well, yes. When we gave you the date of the beta release, we hadn't heard about the work for the new film studio, and that's all extra.

Brennan

Ok, I can understand that it's difficult keeping up with the extras when you are already down on people.

However, I don't recall you saying anything about delays or resource difficulties in our weeklies.

Frankly, I'm still annoyed.

There are a lot of people contributing to this project and I want to be able to trust all of them to either meet their commitments or alert me if they cannot. I want to see everyone working on the project showing a good level of interdependence. It's much more fun that way!

You know what I mean? Am I making sense?

Glen

Er, yes, I guess so. 'Sound like a good approach. What can I say?

Brennan

Perhaps you could give us an update on IT's release schedule, with any risks and caveats ...

... the conversation continues ...

Suggested learning points and questions:

1. Brennan's first statement is in classic NVC format (notice the informal way of expressing a need for clarification: 'I'm wondering if I've missed something ...'). Since Brennan's objective is not only to confront Glen but also to better understand what went wrong, they don't go too far before prompting Glen to explain what's happened.

2. Brennan listens, and demonstrates that they are listening ('Ok, I can understand ...'). However, they are still annoyed, and they say so. Glen probably does not want to hear 'I'm still annoyed', but the statement is not inflammatory since it does not accuse.

3. Brennan continues. We could argue that 'a lot of people' is a judgement and should be replaced by a real, factual statement (e.g. 'there are 26 people working on this project, on average, this month, and 33 if we include contractors and the cleaning lady') ... but let's not be too picky :-)

4. Can you think of other needs that Brennan might have expressed, and suggest how they could have done it?

Scene 9: Challenging unwanted behavior

Setting

A couple of days after the weekly meeting, Alfie takes Chris aside.

Complaints have been received from G2 about Chris's behavior. There are no performance issues but, inevitably, the project has encountered technical problems and G2's discomfort with Chris's style leads them to attribute the difficulties to Chris.

For Alfie, the stakes are high: their relationships with both G2 and with Chris are in the balance.

Chris has a tendency to joke around a lot and to tease people. They are multi-tasking and look after "private interests" (such as Instagram and music forums) in parallel with work activities.

Characters

Alfie, Chris

Dialog

Alfie

Hi Chris, how did the meeting with G2 go yesterday?

Chris

Oh, fine.

Alfie

Did Drew or Erin not raise any issues with you?

Chris

Yes, but nothing particularly new. There's the automatic configuration software that is still giving problems and ...

Alfie

That's ok! Thanks. It's not what I was referring to.

Alfie

Drew called me this morning to complain. They mentioned a couple of technical issues, but the complaint cited you in particular. Drew said that he had seen you 'playing' - their words - on your mobile rather than paying attention to the meeting. They said that it was hardly surprising that the project had so many technical problems. Again, these are their words.

I imagine that you're surprised to hear this. Perhaps it's a bit upsetting. Am I right?

Chris

I'm flabbergasted! Why didn't they say something at the time?

I wasn't doing any harm. Even if I check my mobile from time to time, I can still listen to what's going on in the meeting!

Alfie

So you were using your mobile. What for?

Chris

I dunno. Mail, Instagram, fact checking, all sorts of stuff.

Alfie

Ok. In fact, I find this difficult since, like Drew, I get irritated when I see people in meetings concentrating on their phone or their laptops.

Were you aware of Drew's irritation?

Chris

No. Well, yes, a bit, I guess. But they didn't say anything.

Alfie

Are you familiar with volcanos and their tendency to erupt unexpectedly? ;-)

Chris

So you're saying that I should have felt the tremors?

Alfie

Exactly. Now, I want to give you and all members of the team as much independence as possible. At the same time, I want us all to show our clients - such as G2 - respect and sensitivity.

I'm pleased that you feel the tremors, but not so pleased that you ignored them.

What do you intend to do about Drew's complaint?

... the conversation continues ...

Suggested learning points and questions:

1. Even though the 4-step NVC protocol is absent in this dialog, Alfie's speech is guided by NVC principles.

2. Try to identify parts of the dialog where Alfie talks about factual observation, feelings and needs. Do you see any deviations from NVC principles?

Scene 10: Confronting a peer about repeated issues

Setting

A month has passed by since Brennan's confrontation with Glen in Scene 8 and there will be another weekly tomorrow. Brennan *still* sees issues with IT support. Is this ever going to be sorted out?!!

Feeling their emotions running high, Brennan decides to talk to Glen directly, before tomorrow's meeting.

Characters

Brennan, Glen

Dialog

Brennan)

Hi Glen, How are you doing? Do you have a few minutes?

Glen

Hi Brennan. Fine thanks. Yes sure. How are you?

Brennan

Good too, thanks.

Glen, I'm calling to talk to you about the schedule and I thought that it would be better if you and I had a chat about it before tomorrow's weekly.

Glen

'Sounds ominous ;-)

Brennan

Well, the thing is, I'm seeing a pattern.

Several times recently, G1 has asked for a delivery of some sort - like the one for a beta release. You've agreed to it and given us a date, then there are delays, then I get involved directly with your guys. We then have some difficult conversations at the weeklies, and you update your commitments ... and we go around again.

I've noticed this happen four times recently and I dread going through the same cycle again.

I feel the same way as when I have to tackle my kids about doing their homework ;-). When they finally get it done, it's not them that's exhausted, it's me!

But coming back to us, it would take a load off of my mind if I could feel confident that things were going to happen as we planned them and promised each other.

What I wanted to ask you was, do you see the same pattern?

Glen

Well, now that you mention it, I guess that it is a bit like that.

The trouble is that we're forever getting surprise demands and resource problems. The ground's moving beneath us!

Brennan

But surely, if you are regularly getting surprises, then it's not a surprise in itself that there are unexpected problems? Do you see what I mean?

Glen

Not really. A surprise is a surprise!

Brennan

Well, if I understand what you're saying, you're almost certain that issues will come up, but you don't know what they'll be in advance.

Glen

Exactly. There's always something!

Brennan

So this is a bit like saying that we know they'll be bends in the road, we just don't know exactly where they'll be. So why do we schedule our work as though the road were going to be dead straight?

Glen

Because everybody wants things done straight away! If we'd told you that the beta was going to take three months at the outset, you'd have gone mad!

And, what's more, if you'd pressed us to justify '3 months' we wouldn't have been able to, because we didn't know what was around the next bend!

Brennan

So you're saying that the problem is not just the bends in the road, it's people like me, always in a hurry?

Glen

Yeess. I'm not blaming you particularly. Everyone's the same.

... thinking ...

I guess we give optimistic estimates to get people off of our backs, so that we can get on with the work.

Brennan

That's interesting. I'm glad that we're having this conversation.

Can we talk about how to fix this, for both of us?

... the conversation continues ...

Suggested learning point and questions:

1. Brennan has a choice: they can either (1) raise the issue of Glen's most recent delay or (2) deal with the more fundamental problem of the pattern of repeated issues. Notice that the most important decision was taken before talking to Glen, when Brennan decided that their intention was, together with Glen, to resolve the problem of the pattern.

2. When they start on the main point ('Well, the thing is, ...'), Brennan uses NVC in the most straightforward way, in 4 sequential steps. Remembering that it's crucial to establish a healthy communication channel before pursuing other goals, we note that this is not achieved at first. Glen is still rather defensive. It takes some patience and several more exchanges before Brennan sees the light at the end of the tunnel, 'Can we talk about how to fix this, for both of us? ...'.

3. What might have happened if, instead of, 'Do you see the same pattern?', Brennan's first request had been, 'Please can you make sure that we don't continue to see this pattern of repeated issues'?

4. What might have happened if, instead of talking about the pattern of behaviour, Brennan had started by talking about the most recent issue?

Scene 11: Confronting a collaborator about repeated issues

Setting

Chris is working hard and productively. However, they are repeatedly missing agreed commitments.

Brennan, is frequently surprised (and irritated) to learn that Chris is doing unplanned work and that tasks they agreed to do have been put off. When tackled on this, Chris invariably has a good reason for their actions but, never knowing quite what Chris is up to, Brennan finds it very hard to coordinate work across the project team.

Characters

Brennan, Chris

Dialog

... the call is already underway as we join it ...

Brennan

... Well, I'm glad to hear that things are going better with Drew.

Now, have you managed to fix the Transmitter configuration yet? Case 4088?

Chris

No, I've dropped that for now. G2 reported an issue in the Receiver – it's been dropping packets again, more or less at random – so I've been trying to sort that out.

Brennan

But the last time we spoke, case 4088 was *top priority!*

Chris

I thought that keeping G2 happy was top priority!

I can't help it if the Receiver's gone crazy – it wasn't my fault!

There's a workaround for 4088, but the Receiver issue's blocking.

Surely it's got to have priority?

Brennan

Yes, but ...

Brennan

... pauses for thought ...

Reset. I apologise - I'm getting a bit upset.

When you told me that you'd dropped 4088, I wasn't so much annoyed by having this case put on hold as by the fact that you hadn't warned me earlier.

What happened?

Chris

Well, Erin sent me a mail about some weird behaviour in one of the tests. There we some screenshots ...

Brennan

Hold on. That's not what I meant. My question was more, why didn't you warn me?

Chris

Oh, well, it was urgent ...

Brennan

Is that the only reason for not warning me?

Chris

Yes, of course.

Brennan

It would have only taken you a few seconds to send me an email - less time than we have been talking for.

Is there no other reason that you didn't warn me?

Chris

Well, I guess that I didn't want a debate about what to do. I just wanted to get on with it.

Brennan

I can understand that when you're faced with an urgent technical issue and you know how to fix it, that the last thing you want is to discuss what to do with me.

On my side, I'm more than happy when people show initiative, as it makes my life a lot easier. However, I also need to understand what's going on in the project, since each engineer's actions affect all the others in some way.

There are 24 engineers working on this project at the moment, in G1, G2, IT and in external companies! In fact, I'm finding it quite hard to keep track of all the people and tasks and I'm worried that I might miss something important soon.

So, more than anything else, my interest is in helping you - and everyone else - to get on with their jobs.

How does what I've just said affect your views about talking to me when there is a change in the plan?

... the conversation continues ...

Suggested learning points and questions:

1. As for scene 10, it is important here not only to stick to NVC guidelines when delivering a message, it is also crucial to choose the right message. Brennan seems to have managed their intentions and decided to focus on the issue of Chris not giving a warning when they switch priorities, rather than get bogged down in the mire of what happened for each individual switch.

2. Can you locate where the four different NVC aspects - observations, feelings, needs, requests - appear in the dialog?

3. At the beginning of the scene, Chris seems quite defensive and on edge. Can you imagine one or two things Brennan might have said which would have caused the conversation to descend into conflict?

Scene 12: Giving thanks

Setting

Finally, the pilot project has been a success and Drew turned out to be an excellent ally

Characters

Alfie, Drew

Dialog

Drew

Hi Alfie.

So we did it then!

Alfie

Yup! Signed, sealed and delivered!

I trust that the high-ups in G2 are pleased?

Drew

As Punch! You know, they had doubts at one point.

Alfie

And you gave us tremendous support in that sticky period, Drew.

I saw you sticking up for G1 to your bosses, even when we were giving you late deliveries of broken software.

I love being in a team where everyone pulls together, particularly one like ours, with so many organisations involved.

The way you behaved helped me keep up my enthusiasm during our 'Darkest Hours'.

Thank you.

Drew

Thank you Alfie. That's nice to hear. Very Churchillian too :-)

Alfie

Well, I'm glad that we got this chance to chat.

Do you know what you're going to be working on next ...

... the conversation continues ...

Suggested learning points and questions:

1. Alfie is using NVC upside-down, a technique that works well for giving positive feedback: starting with the 'actions' part (what was done), then linking these with needs (that were fulfilled) and finally with feelings (which resulted from the satisfaction of needs).

That is: Drew sticking up for G1 (action); being in a team that pulls together (needs); enthusiasm (feelings). What was done; which of my needs were satisfied; how it made me feel.

2. The overall effect is to create feedback that is, I believe, easier to receive and more memorable (hence, more effective) than a Thank You with little explanation.

3. Compare the above dialog with one where Alfie simply says, 'I'd like to thank you for the tremendous support you gave us during that tricky period, Drew. That was great! Thanks.'

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