

# Managing difficult conversations at work

Sue Clark and Mel Myers. Management Books 2000. ISBN: 9-781852-525408. Paperback: £14.99  
([www.reflectiveprocess.co.uk/book/bookinfo.html](http://www.reflectiveprocess.co.uk/book/bookinfo.html))

The technique for managing difficult conversations, promoted in this book as being relevant to social workers, is largely based on the work of Chris Argyris. They are honest enough to quote his remark: 'Learning [our] model is at least as difficult as learning to play, moderately well, a musical instrument or a sport.'

This suggests two things: that the benefits for such an investment of time need to be considerable and that what we have here is not yet another 'how to lose 15lbs in 15 minutes a day' text, but a substantial exploration of an important question – why are we generally 'closed to learning' in our everyday interactions with others (clients, colleagues, managers) and what can we do about it?

This is essentially a practical book, soundly based in theory, giving a step-by-step guide to developing an 'open to learning'



alternative. Using examples collected from their teaching and consultancy work, the authors describe the characteristics of 'closed to learning' thinking in ten commonly occurring difficult interactions. These situations, though not directly taken from the world of social worker and client, are easily recognisable. They include 'coping with being criticised' and 'communicating unwelcome information that we are obliged to convey'. They then propose three principles of an 'open to learning' approach and map out a way of making the journey from one to the other.

It is deceptively simple, but then so is playing a saxophone – you just press the levers and blow!

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