

## Holding to account: How to conduct a courageous conversation

### Video transcript

My name is Richard Tyndall and I'm an NGA consultant. I've been governing since 2001 in eight schools - special, primary, secondary schools and a PRU.

My experience is that most of the time, schools are brilliant. The challenges governors face are first, getting the evidence to reassure ourselves that our schools are doing well; and second, in the absence of getting that reassurance, deciding what to do next to help our schools improve.

In my experience it's in these situations that the need for courageous conversations arises. I know that many chairs dread this and thinking about what to do next can make them feel isolated and personally responsible. My advice would be to invest time in getting to know your governance colleagues, and to network outside your school so you get to know where to turn to for help. I've been grateful for the input from both colleagues and professionals, in my case at the local authority and chairs at other schools.

I'm also of the view that nobody likes surprises, and so if a conversation is likely to make waves, a courtesy call to those who may be affected is well worth it. I've also learned that using an off-site venue is an option you should consider - schools can be rumour factories and no matter what the issue is, being sensitive to people's feelings and their dignity matters.

A piece of advice I've found helpful is thinking about the choice of words that I use. I now try to start with "I" not "You", as in "I'm unhappy that Maths results have not improved ..." as opposed to "You failed to achieve the Maths target ...". Another useful tip is trying to formulate key questions in advance and to be prepared to repeat the question if you get an evasive or partial response. If the question produces a long silence, I try not to fill the space, but still I find it really hard to be at ease with this.

I think that the performance management process is an excellent template for thinking about and planning your courageous conversations. It is in this forum that factors such as self-assessment, published targets, clear expectations, evidence and external moderation are discussed. It's a formal process, which, if done well, is where it is possible to confront sticky issues in a professional and controlled manner.

When the going gets tough, I find it helpful to come back to the interests of children and young people. I try to be hard on the problem and soft on the person, so that we protect our pupils, but treat the staff fairly, with dignity and respect.

And remember, you do not need to be alone. Make sure you have your supporters briefed and ready.