

MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: DISARMING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

Conversations and relationships are the backbone of all organisations, yet all teams experience some form of conflict. Therefore, the ability to get on with colleagues and have difficult conversations productively is vital. With this in mind, CRF members gathered for a two-day event to discuss ways to master difficult conversations and disarm conflict in the workplace.

Workplace expert **Amy Gallo** provided research-based, practical guidance on how to handle conflict and difficult people at work, as well as ways to help others do the same.

These Post Meeting Notes summarise the discussions and are organised into three sections:

1. Difficult Conversations: Research and Key Concepts,
2. Preparing for Difficult Conversations, and
3. Conducting Difficult Conversations.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

	<p>1. Humans experience the same stress response to a work-based conflict as we do to a physical threat – we go into ‘fight or flight’ mode and may make irrational, snap decisions. Neither is helpful when we are trying to have a difficult conversation.</p>
	<p>2. When we avoid a necessary difficult conversation, we get into conflict debt. This can cause resentment and unaddressed concerns to escalate into a crisis.</p>
<p>Healthy disagreements have many benefits, including supporting creativity, learning, and decision-making.</p>	
	<p>4. It’s important to understand your default reactions to stress or conflict – are you a conflict avoider, or a conflict seeker?</p>
<p>A four-step framework can help to analyse a specific conflict. This involves understanding the other person, determining the type of conflict, articulating your goal, and then deciding how to proceed.</p>	
	<p>6. Don’t be scared of taking a few moments to gather your thoughts if needed – taking slightly longer to make sure your approach is right will save you time in the long run.</p>
	<p>7. Listen to other perspectives and enter into difficult conversations with a curious and open mindset. Be aware of your own biases, which may influence how you view the situation.</p>
<p>Consider what the other person’s goals may be and emphasise a shared goal if possible. Approach conflict collaboratively and avoid making it ‘me vs them.’</p>	
<p>It’s ok to have an emotional response during difficult conversations. Acknowledge your emotions but focus on what is actually true (not just what your emotions are leading you to think is true).</p>	
	<p>10. Common archetypes of difficult colleagues (e.g. the insecure boss) can help structure your thinking when deciding how to approach a difficult conversation. However, focus on changing difficult behaviours, not difficult personalities.</p>



MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: DISARMING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

1. DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: RESEARCH & KEY CONCEPTS



✉ EMAIL

AMY GALLO is a workplace expert who writes and speaks about gender, interpersonal dynamics, difficult conversations, feedback, and effective communication. She is the author of two books: *Getting Along: How to Work With Anyone (Even Difficult People)* and the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*. She has written hundreds of articles for *Harvard Business Review*, where she is a contributing editor. For the past three years, Amy has co-hosted HBR's popular Women at Work podcast, which examines the struggles and successes of women in the workplace.

When we avoid a necessary difficult conversation, we get into conflict debt. This can breed resentment and, if concerns are left unaddressed for too long, can escalate into a crisis. Don't just focus on the risks of having a difficult conversation – also consider the risks of what might happen if you do nothing and concerns are unaddressed.

HEALTHY DISAGREEMENTS ARE BENEFICIAL

A healthy disagreement is one that is productive, non-personal, and professional. Research shows that visibly diverse teams tend to have more healthy conflict than non-diverse teams, as they are more likely to expect not to agree on everything.

Healthy disagreements also help 'productive tensions' to surface, which are important discussions concerning competing organisational areas or needs. This could include speed vs quality, the individual vs the team, or detail vs the big picture. Other benefits of healthy disagreements include:

- Innovation and creativity – the ability to disagree gives space to create new ways of doing things. Research shows that the most creative teams often have the most heated debates.
- Opportunities to learn and grow – they provide space for people to learn from their mistakes.
- Improved relationships – healthy disagreements 'clear the air' and lead to more productive relationships.
- A more inclusive and safer work environment – people feel able to say what is on their mind and to speak up if a dangerous situation arises, as they don't feel pressured to always agree.
- Improved decision making – encouraging healthy disagreement helps ensure the best ideas are brought to the table.



WATCH THE ONLINE SESSION
MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS



HUMANS EXPERIENCE CONFLICT AS A THREAT

Humans experience the same stress response to a work-based conflict as we do to a physical threat. Cortisol, the stress hormone, rushes through our body and we may experience an amygdala hijack – an emotional response to stress where we go into 'fight or flight' mode and make irrational, snap decisions. This is not productive when we are trying to have a difficult conversation.

WE MAY TRY AND MAINTAIN 'ARTIFICIAL HARMONY' TO AVOID ADDRESSING CONFLICT

Avoiding necessary conflict creates artificial harmony – one of the five dysfunctions of teams identified by team theorist Patrick Lencioni. Artificial harmony stifles innovation and undermines the creation of psychological safety and an inclusive work environment.



IMPORTANCE OF SELF-AWARENESS AND KNOWING HOW YOU DEAL WITH CONFLICT

It's important to understand your default reaction to moments of stress or conflict. This can be thought of as a spectrum with 'Avoiders' (who value harmony and act to stay quiet and comfortable) at one end, and 'Seekers' (who value directness and honesty and may act to create conflict) at the other.

Where you sit on the scale may also depend on you are interacting with, or the context you are interacting in. For example, you may be an avoider with senior colleagues, or a seeker when particular values that you care about are threatened. Both avoiding or seeking conflict may be the most rational thing to do in certain situations. However, it should be a conscious, thoughtful choice, rather than a reversion to your default style.



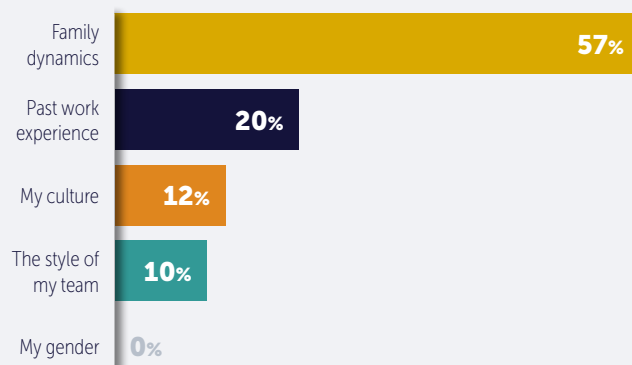
MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: DISARMING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

Factors that may influence how we respond to work-based conflict include:

- *Family dynamics* – communications styles that we grew up with influence our default communication styles as adults.
- *Emotional regulation* – during work-based conflict our emotions may take over and lead us to make irrational, snap decisions.
- *Past work experiences* – for example, a negative reaction to a direct communication style may cause someone to become more reserved and conflict avoidant in future interactions.
- *Role modelling* – research shows the style of the most senior person on the team influences the communications style of the rest of the team.
- *Polarisation* – if a colleague is very insistent on a particular view, we may respond by strongly doubling down on our own or an opposing view.
- *Culture* – we may feel safer or act differently in certain contexts or relationships.

PARTICIPANT POLL:

What has most influenced your approach to conflict?



REMOTE WORKING AND DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Many organisations have adopted remote or hybrid working policies in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning some difficult conversations may now need to happen remotely. This creates certain challenges as there is more room for miscommunication and it is harder to establish rapport with new people when you are not meeting in person. Post-conversation, it is also more difficult to follow up with a colleague.

However, remote working can also facilitate difficult conversations in certain circumstances. For example, some people may feel safer and more private in their own personal space. When we are not communicating face to

face, we also assume that the data we receive from other people is lower quality. We are therefore less likely to make assumptions about what someone thinks and are more likely to instead ask people what they are feeling or thinking. The following actions can also help to make remote conversations more effective:

- Be more intentional. This is important in any environment, but particularly imperative in a remote environment where there are fewer non-verbal cues.
- Understand what will make you and the person you are speaking to the most comfortable. A video call? Speaking on the phone? There will be pros and cons to each method of communication.
- Pre-pandemic research showed that shared identity and context helped to reduce unnecessary conflict on a team. Consider ways to support this in a virtual environment – it could be as simple as a brief virtual tour of your current workplace.

▶ PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety, a term first introduced by behavioural scientist Amy Edmondson, is the belief that you can speak openly and truthfully about problems without fear of reprisal, and has three core pillars:

- Care ('we are on each other's sides')
- Consistency ('we act in a predictable and reliable manner')
- Candour ('we say what we mean and mean what we say, and aren't afraid to deliver bad news')

Psychological safety supports innovation, creativity, the ability to speak your mind, risk taking, and learning. It also fosters an environment where difficult conversations can take place. Without psychological safety, people may be hesitant to have difficult conversations due to worries such as being fired, losing a positive reputation, or a negative performance review. The following actions help to create psychological safety:

- Normalise mistakes. Encourage leaders to talk about recent mistakes they have made, and replace blame with curiosity when mistakes happen. Focus on learning, not just execution.
- Hold opinions lightly and be willing to change them. Accept that there will be disagreements.
- Do not sacrifice accountability to create psychological safety – the two are actually mutually reinforcing. Have clear expectations, but also be compassionate and enquire how you can support people to meet their goals.
- Practise psychological safety every day, and recognise that it is very hard to build but easy to destroy.



MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: DISARMING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

2. PREPARING FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

▶ FOUR-STEPS TO ANALYSE A SPECIFIC CONFLICT

The below four-step framework can help you to make thoughtful choices about how to proceed when faced with conflict at work. In a real time scenario, you do not necessarily need to go through every step of the framework in detail. You can also buy yourself time by asking to step away for a few moments; taking time to respond in the optimal way will ultimately save you time in the long term.

1 STEP: UNDERSTAND THE OTHER PERSON

Instead of trying to imagine exactly what someone else is thinking and feeling (our assumptions are often wrong), consider what might be a rational explanation for why they are behaving that way. What part of the story might you be missing? What assumptions have you made? Could these assumptions be wrong?

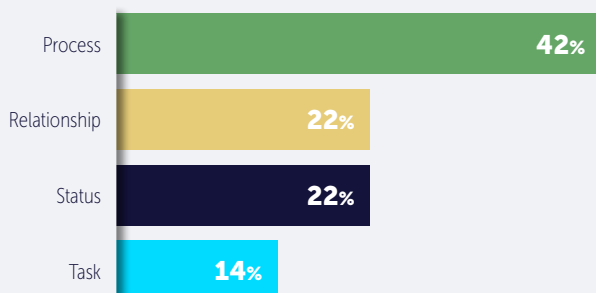
2 STEP: DETERMINE THE TYPE OF CONFLICT

Carefully consider what the actual underlying disagreement is about, which will fall under (at least) one of the following four areas:

- **Relationship** – interpersonal conflict, often based on judgements or values that the other person does not necessarily share
- **Task** – disagreement over the goal / what you are trying to achieve
- **Process** – agreement on a goal, but disagreement on how to get there
- **Status** – disagreement over who is in charge / who owns the initiative

PARTICIPANT POLL:

What type of conflict is most common in your organisation?



3 STEP: ARTICULATE YOUR GOAL

Consider what you really want out of the conversation. If you have multiple goals, pick a primary one. Also consider what the other person's goals may be, and whether you can frame the conflict to align with their aims.

4 STEP: DECIDE HOW TO PROCEED

Once you have considered the other person's perspective, what the disagreement is actually about, and what your goal is, you can decide how to react:

1. *Do nothing.* Examine whether this is your default reaction because you are afraid to have a difficult conversation, or whether this is actually the best course of action.
2. *Address the conflict indirectly.* This requires a deep understanding of the dynamics and the people involved in the conflict, but can be useful in a situation where colleagues are hesitant to engage directly, or you want to save someone embarrassment (e.g. 'something very similar happened at my last organisation and we did x'). This approach is usually more appropriate in certain cultures than others; in certain contexts it could appear passive aggressive.
3. *Address the conflict directly.* Prepare for and conduct the difficult conversation (see below for further information).
4. *Exit the relationship.* If the conflict is untenable, it's causing you mental or physical stress, or your other approaches have not worked, you need to decide whether you can maintain a relationship with this person.



MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: DISARMING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

▶ PREPARING FOR A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

If you have decided that the best action is to have the difficult conversation, the next step is preparation. Amy Gallo advises that there are three areas in which to prepare:

MENTALLY

- Check your mind set. Ask yourself: what are three things that I **know** to be true? What are three questions that I have? You may realise that the only things you actually know to be true are your own thoughts and feelings.
- Consider your counterpart's perspective – what open-ended questions could you ask them?
- If necessary, vent with a safe person to help you dissipate your emotions. Avoid too many side conversations or gossip, which can corrode psychological safety.

STRATEGICALLY

- Plan your message. Don't script the full conversation, but do carefully consider what questions you want to ask.
- Prepare for different scenarios. This will help you avoid being caught off guard when the scenario does not go to plan.

LOGISTICALLY

- Choose the right time and place. Should it happen in private? In public? A neutral place like a coffee shop? During a walk? What time of day? Consider what form and time will allow both you and your colleague to be at your best.
- Allow for more time for the conversation than you think you will need. You do not want to feel rushed.

GOSSIP

Gossip occurs everyday and is not necessarily damaging – it can be a productive way to share information, especially for people who do not have access to normal forms of power. The problem is when gossip is personal or not truthful. Example positive questions you could ask include:

- *'Can you tell me the best way I can collaborate with X?'*
- *'What do you like most about working with X?'*

▶ GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Giving or receiving feedback can be a core part of difficult conversations. Researchers Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen identify 'feedback triggers' – areas that may be triggered when people receive feedback and cause them to question:

- The truth (they question whether the feedback is true)
- The relationship (they question their relationship with the person providing the feedback)
- Their identity (they question their view of themselves – 'am I actually a good manager?')

Be aware of the above triggers when providing feedback and consider how you might overcome them. For example, if you notice that someone is doubting the truth of the feedback you are giving them, you could mention any available evidence. Other good practices for giving and receiving feedback include:

- If possible, provide feedback soon after the incident occurred, as this feels more genuine.
- Start the feedback with your true intention to help put your colleague at ease and gain their trust.
- When giving feedback on particularly sensitive areas, such as someone's style of working, provide options of different ways of moving forward (e.g. 'There are three different options that you could take – which one would be most comfortable to you?'). Emphasise that you want them to succeed, rather than to conform with the dominant group.
- If someone has a habit of dismissing feedback, ask them why this is and if you could act differently (e.g. 'I have given you feedback three times and haven't seen much change – is there something I could do differently?').
- Frame the feedback through something that is important to them or through a goal that they are trying to achieve (e.g. 'if you do X, then you can achieve Y').
- When asking for feedback, be as specific as possible. Tell your team that you are working on a specific thing and would like feedback on it.
- If you receive feedback that is difficult or you think is unnecessary (such as feedback focused on your working style), ask how the identified problem is stopping you from meeting your goals or targets (e.g. 'I hadn't thought of that – how is it presenting as a problem?').



MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: DISARMING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

3. CONDUCTING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

▶ GETTING ALONG WITH ANYONE

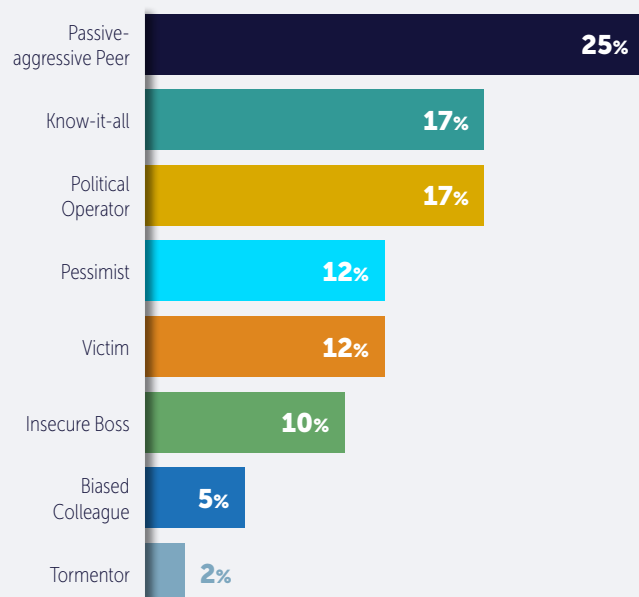
Amy Gallo outlines 8 archetypes of difficult people that we may encounter in the workplace:

- Insecure Boss
- Pessimist
- Victim
- Passive-aggressive Peer
- Know-it-all
- Tormentor
- Biased Colleague
- Political Operator

These archetypes should not be used as labels, but they can help structure your thinking when deciding how to approach a difficult conversation. Focus on changing specific behaviours that you find difficult, rather than someone's personality, and remember that there may be good reasons causing this behaviour. Question how you yourself might be contributing to this.

PARTICIPANT POLL:

Which of these archetypes do you encounter most often in your work?



▶ HOW TO HAVE A PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATION

1 STEP: FRAME YOUR MESSAGE

- Know exactly what you are going to say when you first start. If you have several disagreements, plan to address two or three maximum – you can always have another conversation later on.
- Emphasise a shared goal – what do you *know* that you both care about? If you don't know, then plan to clarify this ('I think we both care about X – is that true?')
- Clarify the problem or label the type of conflict ('I think we agree on X, but what we disagree on is Y – does that sound right to you?')
- Make your good intentions clear. The conversation should be a collaboration, rather than a one-sided view.

2 STEP: MANAGE YOUR EMOTIONS

- Allow yourself to be human and know that it's ok to have an emotional response in these moments – emotions are important data.
- Label your feelings to create some distance from them and focus on what is actually true (not just what your emotions are leading you to think is true).
 - Aim to be respected over being liked.
 - Try mindfulness or visualisation techniques, such as focusing on your breathing.
 - Relate the conversation back to the company's values or expectations (rather than your own) to depersonalise the conversation.
 - Take a break or step back if necessary. Emotional vulnerability is healthy, but not to the point where you feel at risk.

3 STEP: LISTEN TO OTHER PERSPECTIVES

Your perspective is only one view and does not reflect the whole picture. Be aware of your own biases, which may influence the type of behaviours that you see as difficult. Research also shows the impact of affinity bias, where we are drawn to, and have less disagreement with, people who are similar to us. Ask yourself: 'Whose opinion am I truly valuing?' 'What if I'm wrong?'

4 STEP: RESET THE CONVERSATION WHEN IT GOES OFF TRACK

If the conversation does not go as planned, you can try to redirect it or try a different tactic. For example, ask: 'I get the sense that you don't want to be here – is that true? What could make that look different?'. However, you cannot force someone to participate in a conversation and you may not get the outcome that you had hoped for. Focus on what you can control, such as how you will interact with them going forwards.



MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: DISARMING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

When deciding how to approach a colleague who you find difficult, there are no set action plans and you will need to experiment. However, your approach can be guided by the below five principles:

1. Focus on what you can control
2. Your perspective is one perspective
3. Be aware of you own biases
4. Avoid making it 'me vs them'
5. Experiment to find what works – a tactic might stop working, as circumstances change

The **Situation – Behaviour – Impact** tool is also a useful framework to follow during difficult conversations.

1. **Situation.** Point out when and where the specific behaviour occurred
2. **Behaviour.** Explain what you observed
3. **Impact.** Describe the consequences

▶ GETTING ALONG WITH ANYONE: CASE STUDY EXAMPLES

Amy Gallo facilitated discussions on how all the guiding principles, frameworks, and advice mentioned above can be applied to real life scenarios:

SCENARIO 1: TELLING A COLLEAGUE THAT THEIR COMMENTS MADE DURING A TOWN HALL MEETING HAVE OFFENDED OTHERS

- First decide whether you are best person to address this. Do you have the level of influence required to actually make an impact? Research also shows that people hear feedback more clearly if it comes from someone with whom they have a shared identity.
- Consider the best way to address it – is this a pattern of behaviour? When would be the best moment to address it?
- Avoid direct accusations. You could say: 'I know it wasn't your intention, but when you said X, it could've been interpreted this way...' or 'when you said X, what were you intending to say?'. You can also add evidence of how it was actually interpreted, if this is available.

SCENARIO 2: TELLING SOMEONE THAT YOU LINE MANAGE THAT THEY ARE UNDER-PERFORMING

- Be honest. For example, if there is no chance of a colleague getting a promotion, don't pretend that they may be.
- Explain the process for making decisions. Research shows that people will better accept an outcome (even a negative one) if they are aware there was a clear process for making the decision.

- If someone repeatedly fails to take on board feedback, ask them to summarise what you have said to them, to ensure they've heard you.
- Consider setting team norms so that team members can hold one another accountable.

SCENARIO 3: ADDRESSING THE COMMUNICATION STYLE OF SOMEONE WHO IS A HIGH PERFORMER, BUT ABRUPT AND 'ROUGH AROUND THE EDGES'

- State your intentions upfront – 'my intentions are to help you be an even higher performer'.
- Be aware of your biases. As soon as we start talking a colleague in a certain way (such as someone who is difficult to deal with), we start to view everything through that lens.

CONCLUSION

It's important to make thoughtful, deliberate decisions when faced with difficult conversations, which can be guided by the four-step framework mentioned above. Once you have decided to have a difficult conversation, make sure to take time to prepare for the conversation mentally, strategically, and logistically. Approach difficult conversations with curiosity and compassion, balancing the need to listen with the need to advocate for your perspective. By practising all of this regularly, you will develop interpersonal resilience and go into these conversations with more confidence and less stress. It's also ok to share with colleagues that you are trying something new – be transparent, build trust, and start small if needed.



MASTERING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS: DISARMING WORKPLACE CONFLICT

FURTHER READING

Session slides are available [here](#).

CRF. 2017. *Learning – The Foundation for Agility and Sustainable Performance*. CRF Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/learning-foundation-agility-sustainable-performance>

CRF. 2019. *Creating an Inclusive Culture*. CRF Research Report. <https://www.crforum.co.uk/research-and-resources/crf-report-creating-inclusive-culture>

Dutton, J., Workman, K., and Hardin, A. 2014. *Compassion at Work*. <https://ideas.wharton.upenn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Dutton-Workman-Hardman-2014.pdf>

Edmonson, A. 2018. *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*

Fosslien, L. and Duffy West, M. 2022. *Big Feelings, How to Be Okay When Things Are Not Okay*

Gallo, A. 2017. *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*

Gallo, A. 2019. *Managers: Compassion and Accountability Aren't Mutually Exclusive*. <https://hbr.org/2021/08/managers-compassion-and-accountability-arent-mutually-exclusive>




Gallo, A. 2022. *Getting Along: How to Work With Anyone (Even Difficult People)*

Hill, L., Brandeau, G., Truelove, A., and Lineback, K. 2014. *Collective Genius*. <https://hbr.org/2014/06/collective-genius>



Meyer, E. 2014. *The Culture Map: Breaking Through The Invisible Boundaries of a Global Business*

Stone, D. and Heen, S. 2014. *Thanks For the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*




crf UPCOMING EVENTS

-  **IN-PERSON AND ONLINE:**
[Better Decisions: Making Sense of Complexity](#)
 **14th March, 9.00 GMT, London**
 **23rd March, 12.00 GMT, Online**

Register →

-  **ONLINE:**
[Team Effectiveness](#)
 **10th May, 11.00 BST, Online**

Register →

-  **IN-PERSON AND ONLINE:**
[Coaching: Maximising Business Impact](#)
 **20th September, 9.00 GMT, London**
 **28th September, 12.00 GMT, Online**

Register →

crf learning

ON DEMAND: [Advanced Practices in Change Management](#)

Course completed at your own pace, in your own space
You have a basic background in OD and you have led change initiatives enough to know what you don't know. This course will help you understand some critical underpinnings of OD that will affect your success and reputation, discuss what to do and not to do in your role and provide guidance in how to overcome the challenges presented by change in the real world.