



Difficult Conversations

Practice Guide



If you work in a team or you are responsible for leading or managing people, there is a good chance that one day you will need to hold a difficult conversation. It may be about someone's hygiene, punctuality, work practices, interpersonal skills or inappropriate language. There are a wide range of issues and topics that might need to be discussed in order to give people professional feedback.

Like most people, it is probably a conversation that you dread. You might wonder how to bring up the topic, how the other person will react and how to avoid getting angry or upset. These fears may prevent you from being assertive and managing your workplace relationships positively, so it is extremely important to learn how to have difficult conversations. When handled effectively, you will reduce team stress and conflict and increase your personal confidence and leadership skills.

Address the matter as soon as possible

It is extremely unlikely that ignoring the problem, or praying the issue will magically resolve itself, will work. In fact, it is highly probable that unless you take action, the situation will only get worse and emotions or conflict will escalate. Therefore, you should aim to have the conversation as soon as practical, once you have planned your approach and have chosen the right time and place to talk.

Nothing derails a conversation faster than unmanaged emotion.

Bob Wall

Pick the right time and location

You should never ambush a person in a corridor and put them on the spot, or ask for a meeting in a few weeks' time so they worry and get anxious. Rather, ask the person to meet you as soon as practical, or schedule a phone call if a face to face meeting is impossible. Never have a difficult conversation in an e-mail exchange or via a social networking site!

Use empathy

Empathy includes identifying with and understanding another person's values, situation, feelings and perspective. If you begin a difficult conversation by showing empathy and genuinely trying to understand their point of view, your colleague will be much more inclined to listen to you when it is your turn to talk. Aim to use positive and empathic words, tone and body language instead of a defensive, critical or condescending approach.

Rick Goodfriend suggests using 'Silent Empathy' as a way of calming your emotions and seeing the person with needs. Silent empathy is using your imagination to guess what this person needs. Perhaps they need rest, understanding, security or training? He says: "Just take a guess silently. You don't need to be correct because just trying to identify the needs not being satisfied will work to calm you down and keep you from getting angry."

Focus on the issue

A knee jerk reaction to a problem can often make you look stupid and your colleague very defensive. So avoid jumping to conclusions or taking things personally. Take time to answer the question "what is the real issue here?" After some honest self-reflection, you might be surprised at how much the issue has to do with you. If you truthfully do not know what the real issue is, then do not be a know-it-all, ask questions and talk about the issue (not what is wrong with the person). When you have a better idea about what the real issue is, then you can work on possible solutions together.

Seek cooperation

Your aim should be to seek cooperation, not confrontation. To do this, begin the conversation by asking your colleague how they see the situation, or what their point of view is. Ask open-ended questions which indicate that you are willing to work together to solve the issue or concern. By using an inquiring and open-minded approach, you will find that the conversation does not have to lead



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to conflict or embarrassment. When discussing potential solutions, use the word “we” where possible to demonstrate that your relationship is a partnership. Be mindful, however, that you do not blame or sound patronising.

When you pursue cooperation, it can be easier to give an apology or ask for forgiveness. In the book “*Eight steps to happiness the science of getting happy and how it can work for you*”, the authors state: “True forgiveness rests on being able to view the offender with compassion. It requires a significant shift in perspective. It begins with recognising one’s resentments, then being able to let them go.” This challenging but powerful interpersonal skill can transform difficult conversations into conversations that build rapport and positive relationships.

One of the surest ways of making a friend and influencing the opinion of another is to give consideration to his opinion, to let him sustain his feeling of importance.

Dale Carnegie

Speak with clarity

The main reason why conversations become difficult, or result in conflict, is because messages are misunderstood, distorted or unheard. If you want to increase the possibility that your message is interpreted correctly, then you must speak with clarity. To increase your clarity, never assume your colleague can see things from your point of view. Have a clear picture of what you want them to understand. State your ideas in the simplest possible terms, use appropriate repetition and then ask the person if they need you to explain anything you have said. Clarity is such an important factor. As author, Eric Maisel, states: “Clarity is a responsibility. If you aren’t being clear, you’re shirking your duty.”

Motivating for change

If you desire your colleague to make a behavioural change, then you will need to think specifically about what might motivate this person to change. Even if you are a supervisor, you do not have the power to force him or her to do anything, so you need to make your request clear, persuasive and actionable.

The best way to do this is to avoid threats, intimidation and bullying. Instead, discuss how the change will be personally beneficial to your colleague. Leadership expert, John Maxwell, advises that it works to be positive about a person making change. “People need to hear you tell them that you believe in them and want them to succeed”. If they understand that not only is there a need for change, but it is going to benefit them in a tangible way, they are much more likely to be motivated to take some real action.

Build respectful relationships

Do you find it easier to listen to constructive criticism and advice from people you know, admire and respect? Of course! Therefore, if you want to be an effective leader, negotiator or influencer it pays to develop good ongoing relationships with the people in your team and workplace. If you have regular communication with them, if they respect you and know that what you say is in their best interests, then your difficult conversation is not going to be difficult at all!

Further Reading

Leadership 101: What every leader needs to know
by John Maxwell

20 Communication Tips @ Work: A Quick and Easy Guide to Successful Business Relationships by Eric Maisel



Ruth Knight is a researcher, change facilitator and trainer. Ruth helps organisations to improve their organisational and workforce performance.

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