

DEVELOPING COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

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AIMS

- Explore what constitutes a difficult conversation.
- Recognise how to effectively engage in a difficult conversation.



What is a difficult conversation? (1)

Difficult conversations are anything we find hard to talk about with another person.

Examples may include:

- Ending a relationship
- Talking to a coworker who behaves offensively or makes suggestive comments
- Asking a friend to repay a loan
- Giving the boss feedback about their behavior
- Approaching a boss who is breaking their own safety or quality policies
- Critiquing a colleague's work
- Asking a roommate to move out
- Giving an unfavorable performance review
- Asking in-laws to quit interfering



What is a difficult conversation? (2)

At the workplace, it is a conversation where you have to manage emotions and information in a sensitive way to:

- Address poor performance or conduct
- Deal with personal problems
- Ask for a raise at work
- Investigate complaints/deal with grievances
- Comfort or reassure someone – E.g., if they are to be made redundant
- Tackle personality clashes
- Deal with potentially delicate situations, such as turning down requests for annual leave or to work flexibly.



In the UK, the top three hardest conversations we face in our lives are all work-related.



PAY

33%



COLLEAGUES'
INAPPROPRIATE
BEHAVIOUR

31%



FEEDBACK ON POOR
PERFORMANCE

30%

(CMI insights, 2020)



Question

- How can you tell when a conversation is turning from regular to difficult?



Q. How can you tell when a conversation is turning from regular to difficult?

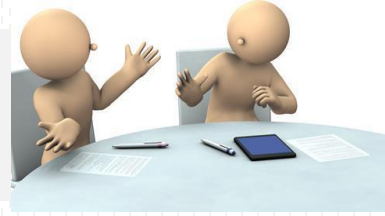
Emotional: Beginning to react or to suppress these feelings – scared, hurt, angry, etc.

Behavioral: Raising their voice, pointing their finger, becoming very quiet, etc.

Physical: Signs of stress and anxiety – sweating, shallow breathing, dry throat, stomach ache, etc.



Sources of difficult conversation



- **Differing perceptions:** We have different perceptions because:
 - We have differing information about the same event/decision/issue.
 - We interpret the same event/decision/issue differently. Our interpretations come from different life experiences that have formed the lens through which we see people, issues, etc.
- **Assumptions about intent:** Oftentimes when we are in a difficult situation, we assume we know the intentions of the other person. Intentions exist only in people's hearts and minds. Unless someone explicitly states his/her intention, we cannot know his/her intention.
- **Feelings:** There are situations when we get so passionately involved that our emotions affect our ability to think, problem solve and appropriately communicate.
- **Blame:** It is typical for people who are in conflict to focus on who is to blame for the problem. The questions people ask themselves or each other are: Who is the bad person here? Who made the mistake? Who should apologize?



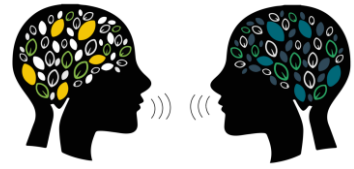
How to go about it...



- Patton, Stone and Heen in their work – ‘*Difficult conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*’ gave some suggestions on effectively engaging in difficult conversation.
- 1. Make it safe to talk
- 2. Listen
- 3. Adopt the “Yes, And...” Stance
- 4. Learn to separate your own assumptions from other party’s actual intent
- 5. Use ‘I’ messages
- 6. Focus on contribution, NOT blame.



Before having a difficult conversation...



- **PREPARATION IS KEY!!**
- Prepare to be direct and emotionally courageous
- Prepare the context of the conversation
- Prepare your state of mind
- Prepare what you want to say
- Prepare the tone you will speak with
- Listen as well as talk
- Objectify the problem. Co-create the solution



Let's outline some suggestions on how to handle the following tough conversations

1. How to deal with a disturbance in the workplace
2. How to deal with anger that surfaces during your conversation
3. How to deal with a distressed colleague
4. Encouraging unresponsive colleagues to be more open
5. Dealing with under-performance



How to deal with a disturbance in the workplace

- If an employee is angry and creating a scene, ask them to talk to you somewhere more private.
- Once the colleague is sitting in a quiet place, leave them for a few minutes to collect their thoughts before starting to discuss the events.
- Keep cool and let their anger blow out. Say little or nothing until the anger has subsided.
- Speak calmly to avoid re-igniting the situation.
- Restore calm as quickly and easily as possible – this is not the time to address complex or difficult issues.
- Unless the outburst is serious enough to warrant further action, avoid blames or referring to the incident once it has been dealt with – *your aim is to move on.*
- The employee may need to apologise to colleagues who have been upset by the incident.



How to deal with anger that surfaces during your conversation

- Be calm before you walk into a meeting that you believe might trigger an outburst.
- If anger is directed at you and the person becomes abusive, ask them to stop.
- You may need to suspend the meeting for a short time to allow tempers to cool or postpone until the person has recovered their composure. Explain why are suspending or postponing.
- When their anger subsides, show understanding by acknowledging the other person's view – this does not mean agreeing with it or condoning their behaviour.
- Allow your colleague to explain why they are angry in their own words – do not interrupt or interpret their words for them.



How to deal with a distressed colleague

Managers can play a crucial role in preventing and managing distress.

- Find a quiet, private place to talk and give your undivided attention.
- Allow the employee time to control their emotions.
- Express your concerns in a supportive and non-judgmental manner – avoid criticism as this may stop your conversation in its tracks.
- Remind them that your role is to help to find a way to solve their problems and enable them to do their job to the best of their abilities.
- Remind them: “It’s okay to be upset – it’s only human.”
- Give the person information on resources or individuals you believe can help.
- Arrange a time to meet again to check on their wellbeing and on the progress of any action.



Encouraging unresponsive colleagues to be more open

- If you know or suspect that the person is likely to be unresponsive, allow plenty of time for the meeting.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage answers and wait calmly for the person to reply.
- When they do begin to open up, be attentive and show you are interested. Go with the flow – it may lead somewhere important.
- Recognise that it may have been hard for them to talk and thank them for doing so.
- If they remain silent, end the meeting and fix another date. Explain what you intend to do in the meantime, given that you haven't been able to solve the situation together.
- Do point out that a negative attitude will not help either of you find a solution that works for both the person and the organisation.



Dealing with under-performance (1)

- Start from the assumption the person wants to do well.
- Deal promptly with any concerns.
- Have all the facts to hand before you meet the employee.
- Make sure the person does not think they are being disciplined – explain that you want to talk about their recent performance.
- Give positive feedback before moving on to talk about how you would like them to improve their performance.
- Ask the person how they think they are doing at work – they may not be aware that there is a problem.
- Be specific and factual – explain how they have fallen short of the standards you expect and what you need them to change.



Dealing with under-performance (2)

- Talk about the problem, not the person.
- Ask them what they think is causing the difficulty.
- Press gently for answers while reassuring them that you want to help.
- Ask what you as a manager could do differently to enable them to do better.
- Describe the help and support you can provide.
- Offer understanding and support if problems outside work are affecting their performance.
- Formulate a plan together to improve their performance – this could mean changes to workload or working hours.
- Fix a time for a further meeting to review progress.



RESOURCES

- Patton, B., Stone D., and Heen, S. 1999. *Difficult conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Viking Press.
- www.managers.org.uk/library
- Stone, D., Patton, B., Heen, S. (2011) *Difficult conversations: how to discuss what matters most*. London: Portfolio Penguin.
- Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., and Switzler, A. (2002). *Crucial conversations: tools for talking when stakes are high*. New York: McGraw-Hill. ISBN: 0-07-140194-6

