



Managing Difficult Conversations

Module Three - Difficult Conversations with Staff

Introduction

When I first became a senior leader in school, I would do all I could to avoid a confrontational conversation with a colleague by putting it off for as long as I could or trying to do it via email instead because the anxiety it caused was too much to cope with. However, as I grew in experience, it became a decision about when to do it, rather than choosing if I should or shouldn't.

As school leaders with line management responsibilities, sometimes there's a need to have challenging conversations with colleagues. Conversations might come about because of poor performance or conduct, complaints received, staff not following policy for example. All of these can lead to difficult conversations, but it's important for our pupils and school that these are successful.

Planning a difficult conversation

A difficult conversation relates to something that needs to improve and is likely to upset someone to some degree. Successful difficult conversations create positive change quickly and kindly. Any successful challenging conversation has three central elements:

1. safe space
2. structure
3. emotions.

If any of these are missing, it results in a vague message, no effective action or it becomes exhausting.

The IIR strategy

In planning a conversation, a successful strategy is the I I R strategy (I, Issue, Result).

For example:

I I've noticed students leaving your class early for lunch time.

Issue The issue here is that it sets a precedent for other students and makes other teachers' jobs more difficult.

Result I need you to keep your students focused on their learning until it is time for lunch.

Consider this scenario:

A colleague always arrives at your SLT meetings twenty minutes late. How would you use the IIR strategy to structure a conversation?

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It might look like this:

I I've noticed that you are frequently twenty minutes late for our leadership team meetings.

Issue The issue here is that it gives the wrong message to other members of the team, is disrespectful of the meeting and stops us working efficiently together.

Result I need you to arrive promptly to SLT meetings from now on.

The three levels of difficult conversation

It can also be useful to consider difficult conversations you may need to have on three levels – low, medium, or high – based on the impact the conversation has on the other person, the school and you.

Low level

A low-level difficult conversation might use the IIR strategy in the following way.

"I've noticed that you've been late four times over the last two weeks, this sets a bad example to other staff and the students. The school needs you to be in your classroom at 08:30 ready for work every day."

Medium level

A medium level difficult conversation might use the IIR strategy like this:

"I've seen that your maths lessons are not stretching your most able children. The issue here is that these children are not being given every opportunity to learn. I need you to make sure your maths planning always shows how you will stretch your most able children and for this to happen in every lesson. Please ask if you need support with how to do this."

High-level

A high-level difficult conversation could be resolved using the IIR strategy like this:

"I feel you can come across as rude to parents at times and this is causing some parents to complain. This reflects badly on the school. I would like you to express yourself in a positive manner throughout the day, especially to parents."

These conversations are worth scripting and running past another colleague before they are delivered. State the positive, not the negative, i.e. I want you to x, rather than stop doing y.

Remember, that we need to pick our battles based on how urgent something is, how important an issue it is and the impact it will have if it's not addressed.

Preparing for a difficult conversation

Most senior leaders in schools will have had little professional development in managing difficult conversations, but it is an important process to get right. Here are some ideas to help you prepare for that difficult conversation.

- **Have the conversation sooner rather than later** - Of course, we need to ensure we have the facts right and evidence to back up what we say; but procrastination will only make a problem worse. Remember the three Ps and keep things Prompt, Private and Professional.
- **Focus on the future** - Talk about what is going to be different in the future. Sometimes, depending on context, we may need to put this in writing, whilst, at other times, a verbal agreement may be all that is necessary.
- **Show respect** - No matter how important the issue is, always ensure that you show respect for the individual as a person. Always talk about the behaviour and not the person.
- **Allow time** - Give the member of staff time to digest, respond and reflect. Remember to use questions to allow the other person to respond and show that you are listening attentively to what they say. At other times, consider allowing them to take time to think about the matter and then discuss it on another occasion.
- **Keep a tight control of your emotions** - Don't allow your emotions to get the better of you. How can you expect professional behaviour if you are not behaving professionally? If you are too upset or angry to hold a conversation, do it later when you are not.
- **Reflect** - After the event, always reflect on how you could have done better, and then move on. Sometimes a small follow-up conversation or nod of the head is enough when next seeing or meeting with the same colleague.
- **Stick to the facts** - Another idea could be to use the 3, 2, 1 strategy which can work well as follows:
 - 3. Behaviour:** Carefully describe the behaviour that has led you to speak to the individual. Have all the facts ready.
 - 2. Impact:** Describe the impact of the behaviour on others; for example, how the behaviour affects students, colleagues, or yourself. Be clear about why there needs to be a change in behaviour. A good tip here is to ask the other person to explain the reason back to you.
 - 1. Action:** Outline what needs to change, how it needs to change and when it needs to change.

Consider this scenario:

On a learning walk, you hear a teacher shouting aggressively at a student in their class. This goes against school behaviour policy. Later in the day you have a quiet word with the teacher. How would you use the 3 2 1 strategy here?



Your response might look something like this:

- 3. Behaviour:** During my learning walk today I heard you shouting loudly at a student in your class. This goes against our school behaviour policy.
- 2. Impact:** It is important that we all follow our behaviour policy consistently so that our students see good behaviour modelled by us and they are treated in the same way by everyone in school.
- 1. Action:** I need you to talk respectfully to all students and model behaviours that we wish to see in them with immediate effect. Thank you.

Why should leaders challenge others through having these difficult conversations? Money is being wasted, time is being lost to these issues and energy is being drained which could be spent on school improvement. Not addressing the issue leads to anger, frustration, disappointment and impacts on children.

Top tips for successful conversations

Whatever the trigger, whoever is involved and whatever the desired outcome, it is important that we, as school leaders have these conversations. It is also vital that all involved in the conversation work together to find a solution, even if the other party doesn't initially see the need.

In her blog '10 tips for school leaders on handling difficult conversations' Kate Herbert-Smith states:

"Approaching the conversation with openness and determination to solve the problem rather than be 'right' will minimise conflict and competition and will more likely lead to a resolution that you're both happy with. There's nothing more frustrating than having a difficult conversation and not being given a possible viable solution or way to improve it. If you're telling a colleague that their performance isn't good for example, explain why and let them know what they need to work on to make it better."

Generally, difficult conversations come about when good intent is sabotaged by a lack of shared expectations. Here are the most common issues that lead to difficult conversations alongside some effective suggestions on what to do about them.

When someone can't see the need for change

Help the member of staff to understand the current future if nothing happens to address the issue (pupil progress suffers, potential capability and loss of job) and the potential future if the issue is addressed (the class makes progress, the teacher feels more confident and happier in their job).

When someone comes to you highly emotional and guns blazing

Diffuse the emotions by acknowledging and validating the emotions. For example, a member of staff bursts into your office, throws down your memo about the staff dress code and shouts "This is the last straw!" You reply "The last straw? Sit down and tell me about it."



When somebody isn't taking on board what you're saying

When someone isn't doing something they need to do or doesn't hear your message, have a repeatable phrase. Say the last thing they say, then use your phrase.

Try this scenario:

You've been speaking with a teacher about the need for their marking to follow school marking policy. They think they are, but they're not. In their words, "The way I am marking is just fine." How would you resolve this?

Using this strategy you might say, *"Some of your marking is fine, but our policy says that we should all do this <example> and that is what I now need you to do."*

When someone believes they are right and are not willing to listen

Here, we need to ask for evidence, listen more than talk and ask questions rather than present your case. For example, you have fed back to a teacher that the lesson you observed was a cause for concern, but they state that the lesson went 'just fine.' You need to use questioning to lead them around to your way of thinking - What makes you think that? So, how do you explain XYZ? What would make this improve?

Feel, felt, found.

When someone feels aggrieved and not willing to move on in the way you need them to, show you understand how they feel, share how you or others have felt in a similar situation and what you found to move things forward.

For example, *"I understand you feel annoyed because it sounds like I'm criticising you. I felt this way when I used to get feedback about my teaching. But what I found is that feedback was given to help me improve and by taking it on board, I did better and so did my class."*

Difficult conversations with staff need to be solved collaboratively, efficiently, and compassionately. A good school leader will listen twice, speak once and enable all involved in a conversation to have their say, feel listened to and leave with a clear expectation of what needs to change, why it needs to change and how to change it.



Summary

During this course we have reflected on what can make a conversation difficult and why these conversations are important to have. Throughout the three modules, you will have developed skills in being an effective communicator and learned how to prepare both physically and mentally for a potentially difficult conversation. Although the course is split into three modules, the strategies we have shared in association with difficult parental conversations are equally applicable when talking with staff and vice versa. Most importantly, remember that most conversations are held with good intent, and if we can use the strategies shared through this course to change expectation, then most difficult conversations will simply transform into a professional conversation between two or more people.

Congratulations, you have now completed the 'Managing Difficult Conversations' course and we trust you have found it useful. Simply close this window to save your progress and click 'Questionnaire 3' to complete the accompanying questionnaire.