

# Handling Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations are part and parcel of managerial life. Whether it's telling your team they're not getting a pay rise or taking someone to task over inappropriate behaviour, these top tips provide practical advice and useful phrases you can use to handle tricky or uncomfortable conversations.

Difficult conversations in the workplace can cover a wide range of topics, from tackling problem behaviour (e.g. under-performance, bullying,

persistent lateness); to breaking bad news (e.g. redundancies); to talking to a team member about potentially uncomfortable issues such as poor personal hygiene or irritating personal habits.

Whatever the subject matter, the following tips should help you handle even the most difficult conversations with ease.

## General tips

**Timing is important.** Don't take the other person by complete surprise. You may need to prepare the groundwork by emailing them or dropping by their desk to tell them that there is something you wish to discuss with them. Approach them when they are more likely to be receptive (i.e. not immediately before a crucial deadline or when they are heading in to another meeting).

**Choose a quiet, private place,** where you won't be disturbed and others won't overhear the conversation.

**Focus on the issue,** rather than the person, and stick to the facts. If you are addressing a behavioural issue, describe the impact the person's behaviour has had and who it affected. Use specific examples as evidence to back up what you are saying; this will help put the conversation in context, and switch the focus from 'you' to 'I'. For example, rather than saying 'You're always late in delivering reports', instead say 'I felt disappointed when you handed in the report late last week; it meant we missed an important deadline.'

**Be careful not to let emotion cloud your judgement:** 'good' and 'bad' are not quite the same as what you like or dislike, therefore it's important to become detached from your personal preferences.

**Use positive body language.** Ensure your voice is calm and moderate, maintain eye contact and use open gestures. Be aware of the other person's body language too: How are they sitting? Are their arms folded in a defensive position? Are they sitting back in their chair? Are they making eye contact? Picking up on body language signals can be an early signal as to how well the conversation is going.

**Acknowledge the other person's point of view.**

What you have said may come as a surprise to them, so ensure that you allow them sufficient time to take on board your points and allow them the right of reply. If appropriate, tell them that you can follow up this discussion at a later date, when they have had more time to consider the subject you have approached them about.

**Work together to develop a mutually acceptable solution:** ask the employee for suggestions on what they could do to address the situation discussed, then agree on next steps, who will be responsible for them and how/when you will monitor progress.

**Offer additional support.** Ensure that the other person knows you are willing to give them further guidance; tell them they should not be afraid to approach you for extra help whenever they need it. Also provide them with some alternative sources of support (e.g. other team members, another department or organisation, a useful website or publication), especially if you suspect they may not be comfortable approaching you.

## Useful openers

It's often hard to know where to begin when you need to have a difficult conversation, especially when the other person may be unaware of the situation. However, (depending on the situation) these handy phrases should help get you started:

- Would this be a good time to talk?
- I have something I'd like to discuss with you - do you have a few minutes to spare now?
- I need your help with something. Can we talk about it now?
- I've been meaning to speak to you -when would be a good time for you?
- I have some feedback I'd like to share with you, if that's OK?
- I'm afraid I have some bad news to share with you

## Handling reactions

It is important to be aware that different people will respond to difficult conversations in different ways. Some may be tearful; some may become angry; and some may become defensive, trying to divert the blame elsewhere. You can't control this. What you can control, however, is the situation. You can do this by:

- **Recognising the other person's emotion.** Pay attention not only to what they are saying but how they are saying it (e.g. volume and tone of voice) and their body language. Be aware of the signals early on in the conversation - based on what you hear and observe, you can tailor your communication accordingly.
- **Staying calm.** If someone is raising their voice, resist the temptation to mirror this behaviour. Pay particular attention to your voice and body language: when you are stressed, it is common to rush what you are saying, raise the tone or volume of your voice and avoid eye contact. It is important to find the right balance between empathising and remaining comfortable and self-assured.
- **Remaining professional and in control:** refrain from becoming emotional yourself.

- Considering the **possible reasons** why the employee is responding in a particular way; this will help you to respond appropriately and direct their actions positively.
- Sometimes it helps to **feed back what you think they are feeling**, as this shows you are listening and taking their feelings seriously. To do this, you could say, for example, 'You seem angry/upset/disappointed/shocked/surprised'. This will also help them to open up to you, paving the way for a more meaningful and constructive discussion.
- If the other person is very angry, give them time to vent their feelings - listen without responding until they have completely finished. This will help you work together towards the best solution once the other person has had time to calm down.

When handling others' reactions, there are some key phrases you can use to help get the conversation back on track. For example, if the other person responds by:

- **Crying:** say 'I can see that this is upsetting. I'll give you a moment to compose yourself before we continue.'
- **Being angry:** Say 'I understand that this situation is frustrating. Please take a few minutes to calm down. We'll work together to find the best solution.'
- **Blaming others:** say 'I realise that there may be other people involved but this conversation is just about you and me; I will have the same conversation with the others. If you are genuinely concerned about someone else's behaviour then please come and talk to me later and we can discuss it then.'
- **Saying nothing:** say 'Is what I've said clear? Do you have any questions?'

## Remember...

Being able to have difficult conversations is a key communication skill for managers, which, with time and practice, will become easier. While it can be tempting to avoid difficult conversations, when handled properly, they have the potential to be constructive discussions which can help improve team performance.