



HOW TO HAVE A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

When you are planning on having a difficult conversation with someone the first thing that you need to consider is whether you want the meeting to be formal or informal. If it is likely that the meeting will end in the employee facing disciplinary action such as you having received an allegation of theft then you would want a more formal setting than you would if you just wanted to discuss a minor issue with their performance.

The following steps give you a useful framework for dealing with challenging conversations such as performance, conduct or personal issues.

If you are having a more informal chat with an employee and just want to sound them out about how they feel, you may wish to adopt a more conversational and relaxed approach. For example, it may be more appropriate when you start the meeting to put the employee at ease by asking lots of open questions rather than being overly procedural. This is a judgment call only you can make depending on the nature of the problem.

PLANING

- Arrange to use a meeting room or private area where you won't be interrupted
- Make sure you have all the information you need in advance
- Make notes about all the points you want to raise
- Make a note of the questions that you plan to ask

INTRODUCTION – SET THE RIGHT TONE

- If the meeting is informal break the ice by asking them an easy question such as have you been busy today?
- Begin by thanking them for coming and explain the purpose of the meeting
- Explain that you will be making notes and apologise if you don't make eye contact you just want to make sure you record what they say.
- Adopt a calm and professional manner
- Explain the structure of the meeting if applicable
- Reassure them about confidentiality

DISCUSS THE ISSUES AND PROVIDE EVIDENCE IF YOU HAVE ANY

- Tell them what the issue is and why you feel it needs to be addressed
- Give examples along with dates, statements, work, emails etc.
- Explain the impact that it is having on the individual, team or organization

ASK FOR AN EXPLANATION

- Listen to what they have to say
- Make notes so that you don't miss anything and can refer to them later
- Keep an open mind and don't jump to conclusions
- Acknowledge their position and any extenuating circumstances that they may have given
- If new evidence emerges, adjourn the meeting if it feels appropriate

QUESTION

- Based on the explanation that they have given, ask probing questions that will help you explore the issues together

AGREE A WAY FORWARD

- Ask the employee if they have any suggestions on how to resolve the situation
- Discuss the options
- MAKE A DECISION – You are in charge!
- Arrange a follow up meeting if you feel it is required
- Provide support where agreed
- Agree outcomes and timescales and standards required

FOLLOW UP

- Follow up the meeting with an email confirming all the points that were discussed along with the actions going forward and the timescales they have to meet these.
- Detail the support or training that you will provide
- Explain the consequences if the situation doesn't improve or the required standards aren't met

TIPS

1. Be firm and don't allow them to side track you
2. Don't be afraid to refer to your notes
3. Remain calm and don't respond to manipulative behaviour
4. Remember you are in control and can adjourn the meeting at any time if you feel it isn't appropriate to continue
5. Make notes of the key things they say and actions so that you don't forget anything important
6. Back everything up in writing

WHAT IS A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION?

A difficult or challenging conversation is a conversation where you have to manage emotions and information in a sensitive way in order to:

- address poor performance or conduct
- deal with personal problems
- investigate complaints/deal with grievances
- comfort or reassure someone
- tackle personality clashes.

The conversation usually takes place one-to-one and can really test a line manager's skills.

WHY SHOULD I ACT NOW?

If you do not act now then you could:

- mislead the employee by giving the impression that there is no problem
- deny the employee the chance to improve or put things right
- damage the productivity and efficiency of your department
- lower the morale amongst team members.

It is far better to nip problems in the bud, wherever possible, rather than waiting for them to become more entrenched or complicated.

WHAT SKILLS DO I NEED TO HANDLE A CHALLENGING CONVERSATION?

Many of the skills needed to manage difficult conversations and behaviour are often referred to, in a rather derogatory tone, as 'soft skills'. But there's nothing soft about dealing with an emotional or confrontational employee who may appear to be trying to unsettle or undermine you.

In order to manage a difficult conversation you need to think carefully about:

- the way you communicate
- your ability to take control of a meeting
- your levels of self-belief. Be confident and understanding

I'M REALLY NOT COMFORTABLE WITH HAVING THESE CONVERSATIONS. CAN I GET HELP?

As with all things in life, the more you do something the more confident you get at it. The first time you have to have a difficult conversation with someone is always hard but there are people who can support you if you aren't happy to do this alone. The HR team or your manager are happy to sit in with you when you have these meetings and guide you on what to say and how to handle it until you gain confidence.