

THE HR HANDBOOK

Managing Difficult Workplace Conversations





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MANAGING DIFFICULT WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS

Managing difficult workplace conversations is an inevitable part of any HR professional's role, whether it's addressing an employee who is always late or a consistently underperforming team.

Regardless of what industry or job you're in, or the types of relationships you have with your colleagues and employees, some conversations are hard to have. However, they are a necessary element of a healthy work environment.

When done correctly, they can have immense benefits, including clearing any lingering tension, resolving disputes, realigning expectations and establishing or re-establishing boundaries.

In this eBook, we explore the concept of difficult conversations in the workplace, why they need to happen and how to navigate them from the perspective of a Human Resources manager.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE DIFFICULT WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS?

If there is a problem in your organisation, it needs to be brought to light, addressed and resolved. Avoiding it won't make it go away, and in fact, will only make things worse over time.

A 2019 poll from VitalSmarts, a top 20 leadership training company, found that more than 80% of US workers were actively avoiding at least one difficult conversation at work. The poll also showed that rather than speaking up, 50% of people 'avoided the other person at all costs', 37% of them considered taking a different job, and 11% actually did quit their job.

Instead of resorting to such drastic measures, Jean-Francois Manzoni, Professor of Human Resources and Organizational Development at INSEAD, believes that the key is to learn how to handle these conversations in a way that produces 'a better outcome: less pain for you, and less pain for the person you're talking to.'

This is the ultimate goal of any difficult conversation, so how can you strive to ensure a better outcome for both parties?





TIPS FOR MANAGING DIFFICULT WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS

Stay calm and in control of your emotions

You must approach the situation with a calm, clear head. If you're angry or emotional, the other person will pick up on your energy and non-verbal cues and automatically be on the defensive.

Try to keep the following tips in mind:

- Focus on your breathing
- Keep your tone and body language relaxed and non-confrontational.
- Take a moment before responding, especially if the conversation starts to get heated.
- Remember that the more in control you are, the better you'll be able to communicate your key message.

Depending on the circumstances and your relationship with the individual, this can be more difficult the longer the conversation continues, so actively remind yourself throughout to keep calm and in control.

Set a positive tone from the outset

Approaching the conversation with a positive mindset is key. Even if you're delivering less-than-stellar feedback, try to frame it constructively.

Look for solutions, rather than pointing fingers or asserting blame.

Use your emotional intelligence to plan ahead

For the conversation to go smoothly, you need to mentally stay one step ahead.

Anticipate the other person's responses, consider how your message might be received from their perspective, and plan your approach for moving the conversation forward in a productive, positive way.

Be clear about what specific issue you are addressing

While your intuition might correctly guess that something is off when it comes to an employee, you must be clear about what exactly the issue is.

Don't begin a difficult conversation with vague, general rambling. Instead, highlight exactly what the problem is and make it clear you are discussing and addressing that issue specifically.

Be concise

Don't beat around the bush when you're having a difficult conversation — it will just make it more awkward and drawn-out, plus your key points might get lost.

Aim to get your key point across clearly and concisely, and try to have concrete examples to share where appropriate.





Show empathy and understanding

It's easy to get tunnel vision when you're preparing for a tough conversation, but you must consider it from the other person's perspective. How is it going to make them feel? What emotions are likely to come up for them?

Make sure you explain why you're having this conversation in the first place. This will help them to understand where you're coming from and can build a sense of trust, rather than suspicion or hostility.

It's also important to allow time for them to process what you're saying and gather their thoughts. Pause frequently to check in with them, and be empathetic if they get upset or emotional.

Brainstorm and problem-solve together

Difficult conversations should be a dialogue between two people, not a dressing down or a witch hunt.

Remember, the goal is to come up with a solution for both of you, so aim to have an open discussion and brainstorm ideas together.

By the end of the meeting, you should both be crystal clear on the plan for moving forward.

Don't put off difficult workplace conversations

The VitalSmarts poll showed that *'1 in 4 people have put off their scary conversation for 6 months, 1 in 10 for an entire year, and another 1 in 10 for more than 2 years.'*

These statistics show that avoiding difficult conversations is very common, but it is not the best approach. Putting it off will only make it more difficult than it needs to be, and you will probably feel more anxious about it than if you had just addressed it at the time.

THE KEY TO NAVIGATING DIFFICULT WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS

There is no doubt that difficult conversations can be awkward and unpleasant for both parties.


However, they are an essential part of keeping your company culture healthy and strong. The key to success is to approach them with honesty, openness and empathy. Following the tips outlined above will help you to manage difficult conversations with ease, all while developing your communication and interpersonal skills.

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