

Difficult conversations

Difficult conversations at work are usually the responsibility of management, whether they involve settling a dispute between colleagues, broaching a sensitive subject, or breaking bad news such as redundancies or pay cuts.

In tough economic times, when managers are put under extra pressure to lift staff morale and maintain high productivity, it comes as no surprise that a recent survey found that most managers (60 per cent) are often or sometimes putting off difficult conversations. However, managers who fail to tackle difficult conversations in a prompt and decisive manner may risk significant damage to staff engagement and turnover, as well as more formal stages such as employment tribunals.

Earlier this year Learning Consultancy Partnership's report – *Handling difficult conversations at work* – was published, bringing together the results of surveying over 100 managers and HR professionals. It revealed a range of subjects that managers find difficult: behavioural issues (23 per cent); poor performance (20 per cent); personal hygiene (20 per cent); firing or redundancy (11 per cent); absence or lateness (6 per cent); communicating change (5 per cent), and an individual's personal difficulties (3 per cent).

Managers need the appropriate information and tools to prepare for difficult conversations – as well as training or coaching if under extra pressure – to give them the confidence to deal with difficult reactions. Difficult conversations must be seen as positive opportunities to learn and develop as individuals and organisations, rather than something to avoid and delay.

● Get the facts straight

Prior to having or even planning the conversation, ensure all the facts are gathered; this means collecting a balanced view that is not based on hearsay, as well as preparing all necessary data. The latter is particularly important for conversations that may stimulate emotional or defensive responses such as behavioural issues or poor performance; collecting the evidence allows the issue to be discussed in a clear and neutral manner that will not seem personal.

Managers should prepare for difficult conversations with staff in a prompt and decisive manner. **Natasha Stone** offers some top tips



An unhelpful opening to a conversation that implies blame is likely to make the individual more emotional

● Consider how you respond to conflict

To be able to focus on responding to the other person's emotions and bringing the conversation to a positive conclusion, it can be highly beneficial to spend time thinking about how your own body responds to conflict and what the warning signs are. Even if you feel you are able to respond to certain behaviour in a calm and rational manner, feelings such as impatience or annoyance may be communicated non-verbally through body language and tone of voice. Also consider what types of actions in others can stimulate certain responses from you. For example, if you prefer a concise high-level overview, you may tend to become irritated when a direct report goes into a lot of detail.

● Use a productive opening

The opening of the conversation will help to shape the direction of the entire meeting; an unhelpful opening that implies blame is likely to make the individual stressed and emotional. For example: 'You are failing to meet the targets. What are you going to do about this?'

Choosing an opening that summarises the problem neutrally and

invites collaboration is likely to lead to a more positive conversations. For example: 'I have been looking through your performance reports and have highlighted some areas I think can be improved, perhaps we could discuss this together?'

Notice that the more positive example uses 'I' to explain the problem and 'you' when focusing on the solution; taking care to use 'I' and 'you' in such a way throughout will ensure that the individual does not feel criticised or blamed and is able to focus on finding a solution rather than defending himself.

● Acknowledge and invite emotions throughout

Emotions should be responded to and understood, but the manager should be aware that emotional responses may continue throughout the conversation and will need to be constantly acknowledged if the individual is to feel satisfied by the conclusions. It may be necessary to clarify and explore emotional responses and it is essential that presumptions are not made of the reasons behind emotions. Ask simple questions such as: 'You don't feel happy about this – why is that?' Also remember that while both parties may appear to agree on the facts, what these actually mean may differ greatly, such as who is at fault, what the intentions were or what the consequences are.

An effective way to acknowledge and clarify both perspectives is to use the word 'and'. For example: 'So you think we should change the process and I think we don't need to – let's talk about this'. Of course, strong emotions may not always be present, but where they are, inviting them is essential to making the employee feel valued and motivated; showing empathy will not change the facts of the matter and must not be seen as watering down the message. ●

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