



## **WEB EXCLUSIVE - We Need to Talk: 5 Tips For Conducting Difficult Workplace Conversations**

Insights

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Coaching. Progressive discipline. Notice of termination. If you ask your managers to list their favorite responsibilities, they would probably leave those off the list. Why? Because they all involve having difficult conversations with employees, and no one ever likes to be the bearer of bad news.

All too often, managers can become so overwhelmed with anxiety leading up to these types of crucial workplace conversations that they just avoid having them altogether, instead hoping things will eventually work themselves out. But avoiding such conversations only makes matters worse, and the results can be truly devastating for employers: disengaged employees, reduced productivity, poor-quality work, unhappy clients or customers, and low morale.

Although having difficult conversations with employees requires a certain level of compassion and skill, managers should ultimately develop the kind of courage that is necessary for initiating these conversations. This type of courage comes directly from experience. In other words, the more experience managers have engaging in difficult conversations with employees, the better they will become at it. Here are five useful tips to keep in mind when addressing difficult situations in the workplace:

### **1. 1. Identify The Real Issue**

First and foremost, it's important to identify the real issue at hand and be able to explain it to the employee in a clear and succinct manner. When getting to the root of the matter, managers should always ask themselves two questions: "What conduct is causing the problem?" and "What impact is it having on others?" A lack of focus on these central questions risks overwhelming the conversation with unrelated issues.

### **2. Clarify Your Objective**

Never start a crucial workplace conversation without a plan. After you have identified the real issue at hand, take a step back to clarify what you want to achieve through the conversation. It's critical for managers to be clear on the message they want to convey and what they hope to achieve from their efforts.

Difficult workplace conversations often have the potential to evoke a fight-or-flight response from employees, so it's best to avoid just "springing" it on them. Employees are much more

willing to have these difficult conversations when managers have taken the time to clarify the objective behind it. More often than not, the best way to accomplish this is with a direct and authentic approach—for instance, “Joe, I want to discuss my concerns about you missing the customer’s deadline for the report.”

### **3. Keep An Open Mind And An Ear Out**

It’s important to signal from the outset that you want to have a discussion and not an inquisition. A good manager is aware that they might have preconceived notions about the situation themselves, but can set those aside and remain open to hearing all sides before diagnosing it and deciding on a course of action. Even if managers think the circumstances are crystal clear, they should not rush through the difficult conversation just to get it over with. Patience is key. Allow the employee time to process what they have been told, tell their side of the story, ask questions, and get clarification before moving on.

### **4. Manage Emotions And Preserve The Relationship**

Be mindful to limit any collateral damage to your relationship with an employee. Consider how to use this crucial workplace conversation to fix problems without building irreparable walls. In many instances, managers will have to respond to tears, anger, or stony silence. Acknowledge these emotions and treat them with respect, even if you disagree with them.

### **5. Follow Up**

After having difficult workplace conversations, it’s easy to be so relieved that the hard part is over that you ignore further communication on the subject. Managers often avoid discussing the topic again, or walk on eggshells around the employee in the days and weeks to follow. However, it’s important to make follow-up efforts as early and often as possible.

Sometimes the employee can be so focused on the issues being addressed that they miss the most important part of the conversation: the steps they need to take to correct course. By continuing to check in with the employee on a regular basis, managers can make sure they are clear on what actions are needed to improve, as well as answer any questions or concerns that may have arisen since the original conversation.

## **Conclusion**

Although no one enjoys having difficult workplace conversations, avoiding them will result in the workplace suffering. In order to promote a healthy workplace, you should encourage an open dialogue between managers and employees. Ultimately, this will result in everyone being on the same page, working toward a common goal, and focusing on making the workplace successful.

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