
Having Difficult Conversations



How to Have Difficult Conversations

Our Top 10 Tips

MINDSTRONG



1. Set the Precedent – A Culture of Accountability

Tackling difficult or challenging conversations is much easier when your team know to expect this. As a leader, creating a culture in which everybody (including you), is held to account for their actions, creates an environment of trust and respect. If your team know (and trust) you to be a leader that deals with even the most difficult of situations promptly and effectively, then you are far less likely to receive an adverse reaction when difficult conversations are required.

2. Address issues at the first sign of a problem

If you can address a problem at the very first sign, then you are significantly decreasing the impact of that issue on the individual, the team and the team's performance. You are also increasing your chances of reaching a satisfactory conclusion. However, if you fail to act quickly and you allow an unacceptable behaviour to continue for any length of time, the person responsible for that behaviour will come to believe it's acceptable. The fact is if you've not told them otherwise, then you are giving them the green light to continue.

3. Gather the facts

Regardless of the reason for the difficult conversation, most people's natural instinct when challenged is to defend. You must be prepared for this and have all of your supporting evidence correct and in place; you need to be able to back up what you are saying with hard evidence. If you fail to do this, not only will you very quickly lose control of the situation, but it is highly unlikely that you will reach your preferred conclusion.

A note of caution, unless it is a recurrence of a disciplinary issue, throwing all of the facts at the individual from the outset is an extremely bad idea. The individual will feel cornered, like you have already drawn your own conclusions and that they have nowhere to go. Do not assume that you know the reasons for the undesirable behaviour. Give the individual the opportunity to offer their side and to suggest a possible resolution.

4. Check policies/HR

This does not just apply to misconduct issues, for example you may need to consult your company's policy on sick leave. Although often not necessary, if there's any uncertainty at all, then seek the advice and support of your line manager and/or HR Department. As previously mentioned, people tend to be naturally defensive

and if you feel there's any possibility of the situation blowing up then it would be wise to arrange for somebody else to be present. Remember that if you are going to do this, then you must let the individual know in advance. If they turn up expecting to have an informal chat with you, only to be greeted by a representative from HR, their reaction is likely to be one of surprise, mistrust and anger.

5. Set Location

Location and timing are critical, plan these in advance and communicate the details to all those who will be in attendance.

The individual needs to feel safe and that what they say will not be overheard. Allow enough time to talk through the issue fully and to discuss possible resolutions. Remember that these types of conversation are often a negotiation and that this takes time. If you have to close the meeting prematurely because you have another engagement, then you will not only be devaluing the issue, but you will also be sending a message to the individual that they're not that important.

Think about the layout of the room, many people find a more formal set up makes it easier to tackle misconduct or disciplinary issues, but a more informal layout might be more suitable when addressing personal issues. And you need to ensure that you will not be disturbed, so choose a room without a phone – or put it on divert.

6. Decide on your preferred outcome

All problems require a solution and before engaging with the relevant parties, you must have an idea of what you would like the outcome to be. The reason for the conversation will dictate how easy this is. For example, where the issue is one of misconduct, it may be as simple as the unacceptable behaviour needs to stop, or the individual will receive a written warning. Most issues however are not as clear cut, but you still need to have an idea of what you want the outcome to be. After all, you would not start out on a car journey, not knowing your destination. You may however start out on a journey and end up in a place other than planned. Difficult conversations are often like this, be prepared to negotiate and compromise in order to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

7. Anticipate possible reaction

Although it is impossible to absolutely predict how another person will react in a certain situation, we can make a guess as to their most likely response. Using our

knowledge of the individual, we can run through their possible reactions and plan how we would respond to each. This can help to remove some of the anxiety experienced around the unpredictability that comes with any discourse, but will also help you to have greater control over the direction of the conversation.

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8. Practice questioning and listening skills

It is essential that you both understand and have practice in using open, closed and reflective questions. Different types of question illicit different types of answers and you need to know when to use which type. You should avoid leading questions. You also need to be acutely aware of your own body language. Non-verbal communication can reveal a lot about the way we are really feeling; it can demonstrate our interest or betray our disinterest. Used skilfully, it can help to increase trust and strengthen relationships. Equally important is being able to read other people's body language. Being able to pick up on these 'silent' cues will guarantee a smoother discussion and more successful outcome.

9. Lay out ground rules

By laying out the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting, there is no room for ambiguity. What you say here will largely depend on the seriousness of the issues being discussed, but should include; the purpose for the meeting, assurances of confidentiality and expectations of behaviour during the meeting. How you say these things will also set the tone for the meeting, so think about how you present yourself and the approach you are taking.

10. Stay in control

If you have followed the guidelines laid out above, staying in control of a difficult conversation will be much easier. The two key things to keep in mind are; to maintain objectivity and keep your own emotions in check and; to not lose sight of the end goal. So, do not draw conclusions without first hearing all of the facts, or become engaged in heated debate, but do bring the conversation back 'on track' if it starts to veer off in another direction. Remember that the purpose of the meeting is to get to the root of the problem and achieve a satisfactory outcome.