

TIP SHEET

How to prepare for a difficult conversation

Why? Because it's important we speak out when difficult issues arise in the workplace. But typically these will not be easy conversations. The secret to a successful difficult conversation is to prepare. Here is how.

Which conversations? These tips help with any difficult conversation in the workplace. Here are some examples of when a conversation is needed and likely won't be easy:

- "My supervisee's performance is poor"
- "I don't understand why I was not promoted"
- "My team members are not getting on"
- "The way my colleague speaks to me is unacceptable"
- "I have to tell my team we are downsizing"

How? Go through the steps below. Write out the answers on a sheet before you start the conversation.

Step 1: Get the facts right

Question	Example
What are the facts?	Performance has been an issue for 6 months. Project x was not delivered on time. Report was full of factual mistakes.
What assumptions are you making?	<i>He's lazy or simply not good enough.</i>
What feelings is this problem creating for you?	<i>It's making life hell – my supervisor blames me.</i>
How might the other person see the situation?	<i>That I am putting too much pressure on him and not given him enough resources?</i>
What might their intentions have been?	<i>I think he means to do well. Not to make my life hell.</i>
How have you each contributed to the problem?	<i>Maybe I could have supported him more. But I need him to be self-sufficient.</i>

Step 2: Think about your objective

Question	Example
What is the key problem to be addressed?	<i>I need the report drafted and project delivered.</i>
What impact is this having on you/the team/work?	<i>I will be blamed if not and the team will lose funding.</i>
What other action could you take instead of this conversation?	<i>Write it myself – but I have not got the time.</i>

Question	Example
What do you want to achieve by the end of the conversation?	<i>A clear plan of action for how to deliver the report on time.</i>
What responsibility are you going to take for your part?	<i>I will listen to what I need to do to help support him and commit to providing what I can.</i>
If you didn't say anything, what would happen and how would you feel?	<i>Report would be late / not delivered / I will be blamed.</i>

Step 3: Check the policies and procedures

Depending on the nature of the conversation, this will be more or less important. Be clear about the framework in which you are having the conversation. Do the managing performance policies apply? The prevention of harassment policies? The flexible working policy? If you are not sure, check the HR handbook and/or speak to your HR Officer or anyone else who you think might help (e.g. Focal Point for Women, the Ombudsman's Office, Medical Services).

Step 4: Preparing for the conversation

This is possibly the most important part of your preparation: plan how you will lead the conversation. Here's a list and an example (it's a supervisor raising an attendance issue).

Prep list	Example
When when how	
How will you set the tone? (Courteous, calm, professional)	<i>I will keep my voice low.</i>
Where will you conduct the meeting?	<i>I will call him into my office. It's private and we won't be disturbed.</i>
When will you conduct it? Beginning/end of the week/day?	<i>First thing Monday so we have the rest of the week to work through it</i>
What I will say	
Explain your perspective and why it's important	<i>We really need to deliver this project by next month and I'm worried we won't be able to if we're not all here giving it 100%.</i>
State what you hope to achieve by having this conversation	<i>I hope we can resolve the issue by having this conversation. I may be able to help and at least I will understand better. If need be, it will help me plan.</i>
Use the facts that you know; avoid assumptions or blame	<i>In the last month, you were absent 10 days.</i>
How I will listen	
Now ask questions to understand. Use open questions. Don't blame.	<i>You've been absent a lot. What is going on?</i>
Explore	<i>Tell me more about...</i>
Show empathy and understanding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> by paraphrasing what they have told you and by acknowledging their feelings 	<i>From what you've told me, I understand that you feel overwhelmed ...</i> <i>I see you are getting really stressed by this</i>
Now work on a solution	

Explore a way forward together and what you both want to happen differently in future	<i>How do you see us resolving this? How about</i>
Determine the actions that you will both take to be more constructive in future	<i>This has been useful. I think we should plan the next two weeks at which point you will have delivered a first draft.</i>
At the end of the meeting, thank the person for attending and explain why its important to resolve the conflict	<i>Thank you – I am glad we talked about this and determined a way forward.</i>
Plan any follow up actions or a catch up meeting as appropriate	