

Member Presentation

‘Managing Difficult Conversations’

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today and pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

We also extend that respect to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people who are with us today.

Managing Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations are discussions that can make you feel uncomfortable — they may involve conflicting opinions, uncertain outcomes, sensitive topics or strong emotions. Many people try to avoid them, however difficult conversations are a normal part of life and work. Most workplace issues can be resolved quickly and informally if you simply discuss them with your employee/colleague.

What is a difficult conversation?

In the workplace, a difficult conversation is one in which you have to manage emotions and information in a sensitive way to deal with a workplace issue. A difficult conversation may involve:

- ⦿ topics you don't want to talk about
- ⦿ situations where you're not sure what to say
- ⦿ conflicting opinions
- ⦿ circumstances where the outcome is uncertain
- ⦿ discussions which make you feel uncomfortable.

Managing Difficult Conversations

As a manager, it is likely that you will need to have a difficult conversation from time to time — this is normal. For example, you may find it difficult to have a conversation about:

- ⦿ poor employee performance or behaviour
- ⦿ complaints and grievances
- ⦿ giving bad news, such as ending employment or advising unsuccessful job applicants
- ⦿ addressing conflict
- ⦿ communicating tough business decisions.

Managing Difficult Conversations

Why are difficult conversations important?

Difficult conversations are a normal part of life. The best way to handle a workplace issue is to actually deal with it. Honest conversations are critical for managers.

If handled well, these conversations provide you an opportunity to:

- ✓ resolve workplace conflicts quickly and efficiently
- ✓ lift employee performance and engagement
- ✓ improve relationships within your team.

Managing Difficult Conversations

Many people avoid difficult conversations in the workplace because it makes them feel uncomfortable. Even experienced managers can find these conversations daunting, despite being an important part of their role. We often make excuses to avoid difficult conversations, for example:

'I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings'

'What's the point, there's never a good outcome'

'I don't have time'

'The problem will fix itself, just give it time'

'Everyone makes mistakes sometimes'

'Now is not the right time'

Managing Difficult Conversations

Most workplace problems will not go away by themselves.

In fact, avoiding the conversation may:

- ⦿ prolong or exacerbate the problem
- ⦿ give the impression that there is no problem and deny the employee a chance to improve
- ⦿ damage the productivity, efficiency, reputation and therefore viability of the business
- ⦿ reduce staff engagement
- ⦿ reduce staff confidence in your ability to manage
- ⦿ lead to lower morale amongst team members
- ⦿ lead to higher absenteeism and employee turnover.

It is essential for managers to have the skills, knowledge and confidence to identify and manage problems at work early on, before they escalate.

Managing Difficult Conversations

Recognising when to have the conversation

When a problem arises decide whether a conversation is needed — a conversation may not be required in every case. For example, if the problem is trivial or temporary, you may not wish to draw attention to it.

Next, decide if you are the best person to initiate the conversation. For example, it may be more appropriate to involve a more senior manager or human resources officer.

If you do need to have the conversation, it's much easier to do so as soon you start to have concerns about the issue or see the early signs of conflict. The worse a situation becomes, the harder it can be to manage and resolve, and people and productivity may be affected.

The best communication strategy at work is to have regular informal one-on-one conversations so that issues can be dealt with as naturally as possible. Be approachable and stay connected with your staff and your team. If they see that you are approachable and ready to listen, they are also more likely to come to you with problems before they escalate.

How to Prepare for a Difficult Conversation

Decide what you want to achieve.

Before you have the conversation, ensure that you have a clear understanding of the problem that you want to resolve.

Ask yourself:

- ⦿ why do you want to have the conversation?
- ⦿ what's important to you?
- ⦿ what do you want to achieve?
- ⦿ what is the outcome you're looking for and is it appropriate & realistic?

How to Prepare for a Difficult Conversation

Check your facts and gather relevant documents. Make sure you know the facts of the situation before approaching the employee. Check relevant documents such as your workplace agreement or award, employment contract, human resources policy, business data or employee records. Print copies of any documents you need to bring to the meeting. For example, if the matter is about conduct or performance, you will need to have relevant policies, performance targets, and performance data at hand.

Confirm key details and ensure you have a thorough understanding of employee entitlements. For example, if the conversation will be about termination of employment, you will need to know how much notice is required, what the final payout includes and ensure that the dismissal is fair.

How to Prepare for a Difficult Conversation

You will also need to be aware of any relevant internal workplace policies and procedures so you can manage issues consistently within your business. In these circumstances it is a good idea to seek advice from a supervisor, human resources manager, your industry association, legal advisor or the Fair Work Ombudsman

Think about the employee's perspective

After you have gathered the facts, you should think about the situation from your employee's perspective. Participate with an open mind, genuinely seeking to understand the situation from the employee's point of view. Don't be set in your assumptions – you may have misread the situation.

How to Prepare for a Difficult Conversation

Consider whether you need support

If needed, seek support from your manager, human resources or employer association. A third-party perspective may provide valuable insight and help you clarify the issue and be objective. If you are bringing someone with you, let your employee know and give them the option of bringing a support person as well.

[A manager's guide to difficult conversations](#)

(highly recommended to review & use tools provided within)

[Difficult conversations in the workplace – manager course](#) (Fair Work Ombudsman)

[Video – How to Have a Difficult Conversation](#)

Resources Links

- ① [Difficult conversations in the workplace — employee course](#) (Fair Work Ombudsman)
- ① [employees-guide-to-difficult-conversations-in-the-workplace.docx](#) (live.com)
- ① [A manager's guide to difficult conversations in the workplace](#) (fairwork.gov.au)
- ① [Difficult conversations in the workplace — manager course](#) (Fair Work Ombudsman)
- ① [Video — How to Have a Difficult Conversation](#)



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