

MANAGING CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

At some point in our working lives, we all face the prospect of having a challenging conversation with a co-worker, subordinate or even our manager. While these situations can be uncomfortable, they have the potential to be constructive and deliver a positive outcome if handled properly.

The following tips are designed to help you to make the discussion as productive and positive as possible.

1. Choose an appropriate time and place.

Think about when and where to have the discussion. Find a time when you and the other person will not be rushed or when you are distracted by other issues (such as a project deadline). Also, make sure you select a quiet and private place for the conversation. Delivering a difficult message in an environment where others may overhear will not allow for an open and honest conversation and may damage the trust the individual has in you. A colleague of mine was once told she was to be made redundant in the office restaurant – not a positive experience and one which significantly impacted on her opinion of the organisation.

2. Be clear on your core message. In advance of the conversation, identify your core message. In other words, what is the key message you want them to take away from your meeting? Sometimes it's difficult to keep a conversation focussed on the issue at hand, particularly if the other person is uncomfortable talking about it.



Your core message is your 'anchor' that you can return to if the other person starts moving the conversation onto other topics – "Yes, I'm aware there are some other issues, but as I said before what I'd like you to focus on is..[core message]". If necessary write it down so you can have it in front of you as a prompt.

3. Prepare your mindset. Just before the meeting, diarise some time to prepare yourself mentally for the conversation. If you go in with the attitude that the conversation will have a positive outcome and that the other person does have a positive intention in their actions or behaviour, this will help maintain a constructive tone to the conversation. Use this time to also focus on consciously setting aside any unhelpful emotions. Often strong emotions are stirred by difficult conversations, so it is important to keep them in check from the start.

4. Build Rapport. Even if this is someone you've worked with for some time, you need to make sure you're encouraging a positive environment for this particular conversation. A key to achieving this is by building rapport with the other person so they feel willing and able to share their thoughts and feelings with you. One way to build rapport fast is to use body language to 'mirror' the other person. By using similar body language to the other person, you not only send a message that you are 'on the same wavelength' but you can also get clues as to how they're feeling. If, by mirroring, you notice that their body language shows that they are tense or upset, you can then gradually change your body language to reflect a more positive mindset – and you will find the other person will follow suit.

5. Acknowledge the other person's feelings. Even if you don't agree with them, allow them to express their feelings then acknowledge them – "I can see this is upsetting for you" or "I'm aware you're not happy about this" – without actually agreeing with them, which could undermine your own position.

Avoid using the phrase "I understand how you're feeling" as this can come across as patronising and may imply you agree with their point of view. By acknowledging the other person's point of view, you can convey that you are okay with their feelings and create a sense of safety.

6. Listen and observe actively. Be sincere about wanting to listen to the other person. Also commit to being curious about their point of view and remain curious over the course of the discussion. By listening at a deep level, you will begin to intuitively notice how the other person is feeling by what they're not saying as well as what they are.

You will also notice clues in the other person's body language, particularly where this doesn't reflect the words they're using. How are they sitting in their seat? Is their posture open or closed? Are their arms crossed over their chest? Are they making eye contact?



As the conversation proceeds, continue to observe the other party's body language. This can be a good indicator whether or not the conversation is heading in a productive direction.

7. Provide clear and balanced feedback. If you need to deliver some challenging feedback to the other person, be clear about what needs to change and the impact that their behaviour is having. Make sure that you balance this by emphasising the positive qualities the individual demonstrates and also the positive impact that changing his or her behaviour will have. Make sure that the feedback you provide is based on observable behaviour, rather than judgements. Tell the employee how choosing to do nothing will affect their career and job.

8. Focus on the Future. Conclude the conversation in a positive way. Make sure you reach agreement about what the individual will do to change their behaviour or actions. Demonstrate confidence that the individual can make the necessary changes and set a date to review progress. Emphasise your willingness to provide support, whilst still making sure they are taking ownership for making the changes themselves.

You can become more effective at holding difficult conversations by practicing these steps. Over time you will develop your skills and confidence levels to hold more productive and positive discussions. After all, a challenging conversation can make the difference between success and failure for a valued employee.

To discuss and practice these techniques, please call me now to discuss your needs.
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