Supporting a Healthy Organization

Navigating Difficult Conversations at Work

Difficult conversations are a natural part of any relationship. At work, supervisors are responsible for reviewing employee performances, team members have to give feedback to one another, and coworkers need to address thorny issues such as noisy distractions and the state of the breakroom. In today's workplace, we also need to have respectful conversations about global issues that have the potential to polarize relationships.

While often uncomfortable, these types of conversations are necessary. Avoiding them only aggravates problems and creates strain in relationships. This in turn affects how we feel about work and can even lower our productivity.

It takes courage as well as confidence to initiate and carry out a conversation on a difficult topic. The rewards are well worth it, leading to improved collegial relationships and a respectful work environment for all!

We offer some guidance so that difficult conversations can be had with greater ease.

To prepare for a difficult conversation it helps to:

- Frame the conversation in a positive light, in your own mind as well as in your invitation to the other person.
- Have a plan, but not a script, for what to say.
- Consider a statement to get things started such as, "There's something I'd like to discuss."
- Take a few moments in advance to get centered, perhaps using some mindful deep breaths.

- Plan time between the previous activity and the difficult conversation.
- Choose a private space and minimize the possibility of interruptions.
- Consider spatial positioning so that all parties are at the same eye level and at an angle rather than directly across from each other.

To keep the exchange focused and respectful it helps to:

- Give full attention to the other person using a friendly demeanor, good eye contact, and open body language.
- Tap into your compassion. The other person probably feels as nervous and uncomfortable as you are. If giving critical feedback, remember this is hard for most of us to receive.
- State the concern, using observations and "I" statements.
- Use respectful, non-blaming language.
- Ask for the other person's perspective on the topic.
- Listen to understand rather than waiting your turn to convince. Be prepared to listen more than to talk.
- Check for understanding. Restate what the other person says and ask, "Did I get that right?"

- Ask, "What ideas do you have for solving this?" especially if there are different perspectives.
- Summarize where there is agreement on the problem, potential solutions, and what needs to be addressed further.
- Express appreciation for the other person's time and willingness to participate.

Suggestions for post discussion reflection and follow-up:

- Reflect on what went well and what could have gone better. This helps us learn and grow our skills.
- If there is a need for follow up, share a written summary of decisions and agreements.

Use your Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

A confidential conversation with an EAP counselor can help us prepare for and reflect on a challenging conversation at work or in any other part of our lives. A skilled professional, someone who isn't directly involved, can help us think it through and explore our emotions and biases ahead of time so that we can be at our best when we take the leap. Afterward, the EAP counselor can help us reflect on how things went and how to improve.

RESOURCES

Mager, D. (2017). How to have difficult conversations. Psychology Today. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/some-assembly-required/201703/how-have-difficult-conversations

Knight, R. (2015). How to handle difficult conversations at work. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-handle-difficult-conversations-at-work

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