



Discussing Difficult Topics Effectively

It is inevitable that at some point managers must discuss difficult topics with other workers. Whether the issue is negative job performance, poor work ethic, sloppy appearance or inappropriate behaviour, addressing topics like these may be a challenge that causes apprehension for some managers.

The following tips can help you make the discussion more constructive and more likely to achieve a positive outcome:

- **Give the worker a heads-up:** Don't bring up the issue by surprise. Instead, inform the worker in advance that you want to discuss something important. Schedule the conversation at an appropriate time, but not too far in advance (as too much time may lead to unnecessary stress).
- **Hold the conversation in a private area:** Privacy is very important when having difficult discussions. Select a quiet and private place where no one can overhear your conversation and where you won't be interrupted. A busy lobby and cafeteria, for example, are most likely not appropriate places.
- **Articulate your roles and responsibilities as well as those of the worker:** Before starting your discussion, articulate how each of you will be able to fulfill your roles and responsibilities through this process (e.g., that you as a manager are required to provide and maintain a psychologically safe workplace, instruct and supervise workers, monitor work practices to ensure success, address inefficiency and solve problems as needed). Also clarify the roles and responsibilities of the worker (e.g., that all workers are required to follow workplace policies and procedures, complete assignments in a timely manner and respect the rights of other people at work). In doing this you indicate that you're dealing with the problem together as part of a group effort, which can help make the conversation less stressful and embarrassing.
- **Express your goals to the worker:** Start your discussion by defining what you hope to accomplish. Ensure that your goals are work or task oriented, rather than related to the worker's personality or character. For example, rather than stating your goal as having the worker "*be less negative at meetings*", it is preferable to state that the goal is to "*have positive and productive meetings*". How you achieve this goal may necessarily require a change in behaviour for the worker, but they may likely be happier to engage in the solution if it is framed in a non-threatening way. The goals you set are intended to help you and the worker stay focused and productive.
- **Inquire about the worker's comfort level:** Ask your worker if he/she is comfortable talking about the issue at hand and, if necessary, encourage them to share their experiences, problems and feelings openly. Point out that the content of your conversation will remain confidential.



- **Engage the worker and give permission to talk:** Invite the worker to share his or her perspective on the issue. This way you learn how they see the problem, and you can respond accordingly. Also involve the worker in finding solutions. People may be more likely to follow instructions if they feel that their perspective was heard and that they were at least partially responsible for the decision.
- **Inquire about the worker's concerns:** Give the worker the chance to express concerns, and ask if there are things that are bothering them.
- **Listen actively and ask clarifying questions:** Remain calm and listen actively to what the worker is saying. Let them know that you are listening and understanding by making eye contact, nodding your head, and occasionally reflecting and summarizing back what you have heard. Also ask clarifying questions if you don't completely understand the worker's point of view.
- **Focus on the behaviour/results, and not the person:** When describing the problem, stay neutral and focus on the issue or inappropriate behaviour, rather than focusing on the person. Be specific and objective in describing the behaviour, and avoid making assumptions or laying blame, as this can make the worker defensive. For example, the neutral feedback "*Efficiency is important to keep our customers satisfied*" can help avoid direct confrontation, while the feedback "*Your inefficiency is affecting our customer satisfaction*" attacks the worker, and may be more likely to cause a heated discussion.
- **Identify your end goal and confirm next steps:** At the end of the discussion, communicate your end goal clearly (it may have changed or been refined since you expressed your goal at the beginning of your conversation) and agree on the actions required to achieve it. Where possible, offer to put the agreed upon actions in writing for review by the worker. This can allow you both to agree to a shared understanding and provides an easy way to check back for success or a need for further discussion. Also set a timeline for achieving this end goal.
- **Thank the worker for participating:** At the end of the conversation, thank the worker for participating in the discussion and for their willingness to resolve the problem. Express your confidence in their ability to make changes and your desire for them to succeed. Offer to help in any way that is reasonable.
- **Follow up on changes and progress:** Follow up at appropriate intervals after your discussion to ensure that what you agreed upon is being accomplished. It is important to schedule feedback discussions to assess progress. Guide the worker with appropriate feedback. Don't expect sudden changes; be patient and also acknowledge incremental achievements.