

Health and well-being

FACT SHEET

TACKLING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS:

Facing up to a difficult situation and having tough conversations is something that most of us would rather avoid. But for leaders and managers, brushing issues under the carpet is the worst possible course of action, as ignoring problems instead of confronting them will often worsen the situation.

Here are some reminders of the best way to tackle difficult conversations:

Prepare well in advance

Being ready is key, so before tackling a tough conversation head on, set aside time to reflect on the behaviour and attitude of the employee or team member you need to have the conversation with. Think carefully how the discussion might unfold, how the other person might react and what your strategy for managing their response will be.

Whether the conversation is concerned with poor performance, tackling a wrong doing, improper behaviour or challenging a bad decision, consider the long term consequences of not having the conversation. This in itself will usually be sufficient to prompt you to step in.

Focus on the problem

Schedule a meeting venue where you can talk privately and won't be interrupted. Be clear about the issues you intend to raise and what you want the conversation to achieve. Stick to the facts and ensure the discussion doesn't meander away from the core problem. Be ready to listen and react reasonably to the situation. If there are underlying reasons for their behaviour you need to find a way of getting them to talk about it.

Ask open questions rather than making directive statements – so 'how do you think that client meeting went?' rather than 'that client meeting was a complete disaster'. People are often more self-aware than you think so let them do some of the work for you. If they respond to your question with 'that meeting really didn't go well', this puts you in a good position to continue without making it sound like it's an attack. Take a coaching approach to understand the situation and engage in finding solutions.

Contact LifeCraft for more information on training your leaders and managers.

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Control your emotions

It is important to recognise the emotional content of the conversation, as dealing with it in an inappropriate way will prove counter-productive. As feelings can run high it is easy for the talk to turn into an argument. It is important not to get sidetracked into personalising the issue and listing all the other problems they have with the individual.

Achieve a solution together

If you understand how both you and the other person are likely to react when facing up to a difficult conversation or conflict situation, you are more likely to reach a satisfactory outcome, particularly if this insight can influence your overall approach.

Managers and leaders should not assume that compromise is the best end-point as it might not truly resolve the situation and can build resentment among both parties. Collaborating, where both people are trying to make the situation better and move forward, is the ideal outcome.”

Support others

Try to chat through issues with members of your leadership peer group who can act as a sounding board. While it may not be obvious to a manager how objective they are when entangled in a difficult discussion, a cool-headed second opinion from a peer can be very valuable. In the wider context of organisational culture, a key challenge for leaders is to set the right tone for communications to take place, something that the coaching of subordinate managers might help with. This will ensure that when there are problems they are not left unaddressed but handled appropriately.

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