

# *“We need to have a chat”*



Your **12 step guide** to managing a difficult conversation without damaging your business

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## 12 Steps to Managing Difficult Conversations

There are so many times in our working lives when we need to have a difficult conversation with someone. It can be for any number of reasons. Some examples are:

- they don't get on with us, or other colleagues;
- they are taking too many days off sick;
- they are constantly and consistently late for work;
- they have done something wrong;
- they don't seem to be able to do the job;
- you have had complaints from colleagues or customers;
- their job is at risk.

I am sure we can all think of any number of reasons why a difficult conversation might be needed in the work context. You may be facing such a situation right now....

These conversations are an inevitable part of managing people, or of having any kind of working relationship with other people. So what can we do to prepare for these conversations? What should we say? The key is to handle them in a way that causes least pain for the other person, and yet gets a favourable result for everyone. Put like that, it sounds easy, but it is not.

### Why do we avoid having those conversations?

Most people have an inherent fear of failure and if you need to have a difficult conversation with someone, the fear of the consequences is very prominent.

- What if we make the problem worse, rather than improving things? If the issue is about someone not being able to interact with their colleagues, then talking to them about it could make them withdraw even more and that would not help the situation. So we are frightened of failing.
- What if we talk to someone about their conduct or performance? That brings the problem out into the open and then we have to deal with it. We fear that this will be

long and difficult and will add to our workload. It could even backfire and we would end up making the wrong decision or looking stupid. Fear again....

- Most of us don't like upsetting other people. Surely, the role of a manager involves making things better for people, not worse? We want to be nice to people and make them feel happy and comfortable at work. So having a difficult conversation with them will do the opposite and make it worse for them.
- What if the other person gets emotional? Or- even worse - what if **we** do? They may say something about us or their colleagues, or the workplace, which we didn't want to hear as it creates another problem or indicates that we are not perfect and our workplace is not perfect either. So it is **easier** to not have the conversation.
- What if they get angry, or storm out? What if they threaten retribution, or taking us to court, or make some other threat. We fear the consequences of facing the issue.



**FEAR** is the reason why we avoid those difficult conversations. Especially if we have not had to do it very often before – what if we get it wrong?

Of course the fear we should be listening to is the fear of **not** having the conversation and the consequences of **not** taking any action. It is important to deal swiftly with people or situations which are having a negative impact on you, on colleagues, on the individuals themselves.

## What are the potential consequences of not taking any action?

If we opt for the easier course of action (or non-action) then we risk more cost and damage than the potential downsides of having the difficult conversation.

- Whatever the issue is which is driving the need for a difficult situation, you can bet that it is having a negative impact on others in the workplace. Not least, they will be discussing the situation and making their own, possibly incorrect, judgements. They may be on the receiving end of negative consequences – more work, difficult relationships with one or more colleagues, loss of productivity, loss of concentration and focus. Their morale is lowered and, in worst cases, they may be taking time off sick themselves, to avoid a difficult situation. Unchecked, this could lead to disastrous consequences for your business. This is two negatives really – the effect on morale and the effect on your business productivity and efficiency.
- Unless you speak to the individual(s) about the situation, then they may not realise there is a problem. If they are “getting away” with poor attendance, behaviour, relationships, then they may believe that their behaviour is acceptable. They would certainly not see any need to change anything, unless they are clearly told that something is wrong.
- Unless you have a discussion with the individual about the situation, you will never know what is driving them to behave in a specific way. There might be valid reasons for their behaviour, or at least a reasonable explanation. Without the “difficult” conversation, you are denying them the chance to explain, or to put things right or improve.
- It is much better to tackle a potentially difficult situation in the early stages, than it is to put things right once they have become more entrenched. The longer a situation is allowed to develop, the more complicated and difficult it is likely to become.

So the best advice I can give you is to deal with tricky situations as they arise and have those conversations as early as possible and nip any potential problems in the bud. But how – what are the 12 steps?



## Preparation

1. Probably the most important step is to STOP thinking of them as “difficult” conversations. The more you build up the difficulty in your own mind, the harder it will become to have the conversation, as it is likely you will feel nervous and upset about it. And don’t think of the individual as “difficult” either – they are just another human being, the same as you and I, and they are going through a difficulty of their own at present. So think of the conversation with them as a means to help them deal with that issue. Believe that the outcome will be helpful for both of you.
2. Preparation is the best way to take the fear out of the conversation, particularly if you have not got very much experience of the situation.
  - a. Think about the outcome that you would like to achieve and what might be some ways to achieve that outcome. For example, if the individual is not performing well and does not appear to be able to cope with the job, think about your objectives. Do you want them to learn how to do all of the job? Do you want them to increase their speed? Do you want them to concentrate on just one part of the job? Is there something which they are good at, which you can give them more often to build their confidence? Is there some training, or a coach or mentor, available to help them? Do they just need more time to learn the role? OR are they just not prepared to pull their weight, or are they deliberately choosing not to perform well? This scenario would need a completely different conversation, but it is an outcome you may need to consider.

- b. Don't have the conversation when you are angry or agitated. Go for a walk or get a coffee. Take time to compose yourself and collect your thoughts. This works during the conversation too – if either of you needs a break from the conversation, then take one.
    - c. Although I have advised that you should plan for the conversation, this does not mean that you should write a script and read it. If you need to write down key points to cover, that is fine, but you are very unlikely to be able to stick to a script and it would become stilted and artificial quickly. You need to try and keep the conversation as normal as possible.
  3. Choose the right place and time for the conversation. Don't just have it in the heat of the moment or in response to a specific action (or non-action) by the individual. Give yourself time to prepare and calm down, if necessary. Don't hold the conversation where it could be overheard or you can be seen. In a small environment, you may need to take the other party elsewhere. Make sure you won't get interrupted – switch that mobile phone off!



## Having the conversation

4. Sometimes it can be difficult to know how to start the conversation. Honesty and clarity are key so that there can be no misunderstanding between you. Don't embellish the facts, or try to justify your position. Just explain the issue and why it is a problem. Explain the impact the situation has had on other people – but stick to the facts, don't make judgements or assumptions.
5. Ask the other person to give their version of events and really listen to what they have to say. Ask them if they recognise the problem, or if they even can see there is a problem? Acknowledge that they may see things differently from you and others. Ask them how the situation has affected them. Something they say might change the whole direction of the conversation, or alter your desired outcome. They may have an extremely valid reason for their behaviour or they may have wanted to raise concerns with you but have been unable to start a conversation. Listening to what the person has to say and actually taking it in might alter your approach entirely. Acknowledge any contribution you or others may have made to the situation.
6. Once you have heard the other person's viewpoint, it is helpful to summarise it back to them, so you are both sure you have understood what they are saying. If you do not know what their viewpoint is, then ask them to explain it further. Ensure that you get it right. This shows them that you care and it avoids misunderstanding between you. Listen to their tone and their emotions – are they upset, or angry, or defensive, or do they just not care? Don't be afraid of silence, or if they get emotional. Be considerate and compassionate. Give them time to think about what they are saying and to get their point of view across. Take time to gather your thoughts and adjust your approach, if necessary. Ask them what would be their desired outcome, and try to achieve that along with your own outcome.
7. Don't expect the other party to be sympathetic to you. You may be having a bad day, or have had other difficult things to deal with, but they won't be interested in that – they will only be able to focus on their own issue. Don't try and compare a similar experience you may have been through as that might cause resentment. They might interpret that as your way of saying "if I can get through it, why can't you?" Remember they are a human being too, and be empathetic and fair, but also remember that we all react in different ways to things and seemingly similar circumstances may affect people completely differently. Try to put yourself in their shoes and imagine how they may be feeling. It may be no big deal to you, but it is critical to them. Alternatively, they may not think it is important, but it is a huge mountain for their colleagues. Above all, **DON'T GET ANGRY.**

8. Try to avoid conflict and to find common ground between you, so that you can explore together any way to resolve the situation. Ask them to help you to find ways of avoiding the same situation again.
9. Is there something you can give the person, to help them feel they have been treated fairly? If they are not performing, can you praise a specific part of the work which they are doing well? If they have behaved unprofessionally, can you praise the quality of their work? If you have to make someone's job redundant, or lay them off, can you give them a good reference? At the very least, always leave a door open for them to have further discussion with you if they feel the need for that. Help them to feel that you care about their future and them and that you respect them.

## Afterwards

10. Depending on the situation, it may be useful to follow up, either formally or informally. This reinforces the idea that the situation is being monitored and progress (or otherwise) is being noticed. You do not want to give the person the idea that they are being "watched", but if you can confirm any improvement, then that shows compassion and respect.
11. Think about what went well and things you could improve on another occasion. Praise yourself for having the courage to take action. The next time will be easier!
12. Make sure that you maintain confidentiality. You may have felt the need to have the conversation because of complaints from colleagues, but that does not mean you have to give those colleagues details of any action you have taken. It is not fair on the individual to discuss the situation and it may damage the trust that others have in you if they believe that you might discuss any personal situations.



## In Summary

- Don't build the situation up in your own mind – just have a normal conversation.
- Prepare for the conversation and potential outcomes, but don't write a script.
- Explain the situation clearly and honestly, without judgement.
- Invite and listen to their point of view.
- Try to find common ground and a joint plan to achieve the desired outcome.
- Follow up, so the outcome is acknowledged.
- Keep it confidential.

We are all different, and we cannot like everyone, but we do need to have professional relationships in a working environment. Managing teams of people and maintaining those relationships can be challenging and will sometimes involve difficult conversations. If you can do that, without apportioning blame, then your business will run more smoothly and your workforce will be happier.

## Postscript

An employer recently told me that whenever they have had the need for this type of conversation, the person leaves within the next few weeks! I don't think this is necessarily a bad thing – if the conversation was needed, then maybe there was a mismatch in job and employee. The manager bit the bullet and had the conversation when it became clearly needed. This may have prevented an even more difficult situation from arising.



## About Jill



My name is Jill Aburrow and I am a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (FCIPD) and I have a post-graduate Certificate in Employment Law. I have worked in HR for nearly three decades and during this time I have come across some very dedicated people who are fulfilled and focussed at work. On the other hand, I have seen some very unhappy people whose attitude can be infectious and start to impact on those around them, like rotten fruit in an enclosed container.

My mission is to advise and support businesses with managing their employees in a respectful, pleasant and professional manner so that, no matter what challenges the business is facing and the impact of that on the people who work there, those people are able to enjoy work and to feel that they have been treated fairly and professionally.

*If you want to know more or you need further support with handling a difficult conversation, then why not sign up for my two-hour workshop about **Tackling Difficult Conversations?***

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