

Six Quick Tips on Difficult Conversations at Work

David McKillop

PGD (HR), Advanced Diploma (FLBU), CHRP Candidate

Edited by: Marcel Faggioni

*B.A(Hons), M.I.R., CHRL, QMed
Member of Law Society of Canada*

In every organization, there will come a time when management or employees will have to engage in a difficult conversation. The circumstances of these conversations may differ depending on your side of the discussion but having the right strategy to conduct these conversations will be crucial in achieving a resolution. Before engaging in a difficult conversation, it is important to think of the desired outcome and adjust your strategy accordingly. For example, if an employee has not been performing up to expectations, ask yourself “what is this conversation attempting to achieve” and formulate a strategy to suit that goal. In this example, the goal would likely be to increase their performance; therefore, the desired performance expectations should be made clear, and an action plan, such as a performance improvement plan (PIP) should be implemented to help them succeed, and for you to accomplish your goal. However, getting to your chosen objective is not always so simple. Below is a list of tips/strategies to consider before engaging in difficult conversations.

1. Do not be afraid to fail

Often, the thought of failure can be a detriment to the mere attempt of fixing a bad situation or pursuing a new opportunity. However, if you are not willing to have the conversation to improve the situation and achieve your desired outcome, then nothing will ever be changed. It is important to recognize that you may not get what you want on the first attempt, but determination, resiliency and taking the opportunity to learn from your “mistakes” or past conversations will bring you one step closer to the

right direction.

2. Preparation is key

Entering a difficult conversation without proper time and consideration for the opposing view is a foolhardy approach to success. By having the appropriate data and facts to support and facilitate the discussion, it will reduce the chances of the conversation derailing and mitigate the chance of an emotional reaction. Those who are unprepared, are more likely to react on an emotional level if topics or viewpoints they did not anticipate come into play. Always take the time to find supportive documentation or incidents to help facilitate the difficult conversation, but do not rely on a script entirely as conversations rarely go as planned. In the preparation phase, focus on key points to guide the conversation and be flexible in your approach.

3. Set the tone

When beginning a difficult conversation, it is important to consider the type of message you want to convey and adapt your approach to best suit that message. Be mindful of both paraverbal and non-verbal communication (tone, choice of words, posture, etc.). Moreover, think of how you would want that particular news delivered to you. For example, if a co-worker has been falling behind on their share of the project and you have a smile on your face while trying to have a serious conversation about their contributions, it may send a conflicted message and therefore lessen the impact of the conversation. In this type of scenario, it is best to approach the conversation with an open dialogue and ask questions that will help gain a better understanding of what struggles the co-worker may be experiencing and to allow you the opportunity to provide suggestions on how they may be addressed or improved. Be direct in your messaging. The clearer and concise the message, the more likely it is to have a direct impact.

4. Consider the emotional impact of your message

Difficult conversations are not easy. In fact, many people will avoid this type of conversation based on the emotional impact it may have on an individual, which ultimately results in the perpetuation of the issues/concerns in question. While having a difficult conversation, one must take the time to address the myriad of emotions that are likely to surface during the conversation. It is important to be mindful of the human side of things; allow people time to gather their thoughts and work through their emotions. This may require you to be compassionate to what they may be experiencing as a result of your message. This is also why in-person conversations are often the preferred method (or virtual video calls under the current pandemic circumstances) as opposed to phone calls or e-mail.

5. Create the appropriate atmosphere

Ensure that the setting selected is appropriate for the conversation. In our experience, when having a difficult conversation, it is best to avoid having this type of discussion in a public forum. Consider what locations are available to facilitate a private and discrete discussion that will help the person feel comfortable and put them at ease, such as an office with a door. Having a conversation in private will help avoid the feeling of being singled out or humiliated and allow for an open dialogue, which will ultimately allow for a sharing of information with the central purpose of fixing a deteriorating relationship or an unresolved concern. Moreover, choosing the right setting will help set the tone of the meeting.

6. Consider bringing a support person

Whether you're a manager needing to have a difficult conversation with an employee, or an employee needing to speak to a colleague, you may want to consider bringing a support person. A support person can be utilized for a variety of purposes such as providing support, verifying events, assisting with notetaking or simply being an observer for the difficult conversation at hand. A support person can help add credence to the discussion and ensure that messages cannot be misconstrued or misrepresented to those that were not present in the conversation. Always apprise the support on why their presence is requested and brief them on the situation prior to their participation in the meeting. This will help them

better understand their role/responsibility during the meeting. Moreover, inform all parties of who will be in attendance to avoid blindsiding the participants. Failure to do so may cause the person to feel "cornered" and as a result, increase the chance of an emotional reaction; therefore, reducing the effectiveness of the meeting. It is important to note that if you are a manager needing to speak with an employee, it is best not to involve another employee as your support person. Look for a third-party representative such as a member of the human resources department or a member of management if HR is not available. This will help avoid putting outside employees in a difficult situation and keep the conversations confidential.

If difficult conversations escalate into the need for mediation, we can support you through that process. Our firm has licensed mediators available upon your request and we are happy to help!

For more information about managing difficult conversations, check out our article entitled: "[Difficult Conversations – How to make them less Confrontational](#)"

Contact us if you have any questions!

info@integrityconsultation.com

Phone: 1-705-524-0978