



Make difficult conversations easy

Handling difficult workplace conversations is an art that requires preparation, empathy, and clear communication. This guide intends to provide guidelines for navigating these situations in a respectful and constructive manner. Amongst the most important conditions are initiating a conversation with empathy to create an open and supportive atmosphere. At the same time, it is crucial to be clear and direct about difficult decisions, in order to minimize misunderstandings and potential negative impacts on the employee's job satisfaction and morale.

Important steps include thorough preparation, choosing the right time and place, and providing constructive feedback to avoid defensive conversations. Listening actively, and showing empathy enables the employee to share their perspectives and emotions during the conversation. In difficult decisions affecting the employee, it is crucial to be transparent about the background leading to the decision while offering support and respect.

After the difficult conversation, support resources and services are available to the employee and the manager, such as HR and the occupational health service, depending on the situation and needs. These resources aim to support the well-being of our managers and employees.

Handling difficult conversations requires practice and skill development over time. By following these guidelines and being aware of both empathy and clarity, you can make these conversations as smooth and respectful as possible, even in challenging situations. The guideline below is here to help you understand how to use communication as a tool and provide support when conducting difficult conversations in the workplace.

Preparation:

It is crucial to gather all necessary information about the employee's potential areas of concern, before initiating a difficult conversation. This may include reviewing documentation, previous conversations, and reviewing any potential feedback you may have. Understanding relevant facts is key to keeping the conversation rational and constructive.

Empathy and clear communication:

When you are ready to initiate the conversation, begin with empathy and clarity. Explain the purpose of the meeting/conversation and why it is essential to discuss the current situation. Provide them with an initial overview of what will be discussed. This helps them understand the context and reduces any potential anxiety.

See examples below of both empathic and clear communication:

"I understand that this may be a challenging situation for you, and I appreciate your effort. Our purpose today is to identify the challenges you are facing and find solutions together. I want you to know that I am here to support you."

"I understand this topic may be sensitive. I want to be open and clear about our expectations so that we can work together to improve the situation. Do you have any thoughts or concerns you'd like to share before we proceed?"

"I can imagine that this is a tough situation for you. Let's go through the specific areas that need improvement. I believe that we can find a way forward together."

Remember that different individuals communicate in different ways, so it may be crucial to adjust your communication style based on the individual you're communicating with. Adapting your communication requires empathy and flexibility. Be aware of signals from others and be willing to adjust your communication style to create a more productive and positive interaction.

Adapt your communication:

Know your audience

Consider personal circumstances, personality types, and communication preferences of those who you are communicating with. Are they detail-oriented, results-focused, or do they value personal relationships? Use this in your communication.

Adjust your tone and style

Fine-tune your tone and communication style based on your counterpart's preferences/conditions. Some prefer a more formal tone, while others thrive with a relaxed and friendly approach. Use appropriate wording and tonality to create a comfortable atmosphere.

Be aware of non-verbal communication

People express themselves through body language and facial expressions. Be aware of your signals and adjust them to align with the other party's expectations and reactions.

Flexibility in communication methods

Some prefer communicating in text, while others prefer communicating verbally. Be flexible and adjust your approach based on the best communication method.

Active listening

Adjust your communication by actively listening to the person's needs and opinions. This allows you to tailor your response to address their specific concerns or questions.

Clear communication of expectations

Clarify expectations in a way that is clear to the other person. This may include clearly defining goals, roles, or expected outcomes in your dialogue.

Respect for cultural differences or neurodivergent diagnosis.

When communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, be aware of cultural differences in communication styles and adjust your communication to avoid misunderstandings.

When communicating with neurodivergent individuals, it is crucial to adapt communication to their individual needs. This may include clear and concrete communication, providing sufficient time for processing, using visual aids, creating structured routines, considering sensory needs, and individual adaptation. Express understanding and empathy for their challenges and be open to continuously adjusting communication based on their specific needs and preferences.

Right time and place:

Choose a secluded and quiet place for your meeting where you won't risk being interrupted. It is essential to create a secure environment and establish a sense of confidentiality in the conversation. Also, make sure you have enough time for a meaningful conversation without feeling rushed.

Constructive feedback:

Provide specific and constructive feedback on the employee's performance. Use "I-messages" to avoid triggering defense mechanisms from your counterpart. Focus on observations and facts rather than personal judgments. For example, instead of saying, "You are inefficient," say, "I have noticed that it takes longer than expected for you to complete tasks."

Listen and show empathy:

Give your counterpart an opportunity to share their perspectives and feelings. Be an active listener and show understanding of their situation. It is essential

that they feel heard and respected. Ask open-ended questions and avoid interrupting.

Determination:

If your difficult conversation involves delivering a difficult decision, you need to be straightforward and clear but empathetic in how you deliver the information. Clarify that the decision is based on, for example, performance or other concrete facts related to the decision, and not an evaluation of them as an individual. Avoid giving false hopes or unnecessary details about the decision.

Here is some advice and examples on how to balance directness and empathy when communicating difficult decisions to avoid misunderstandings and reduce the potential negative impact on the employee's work morale.

Start with empathy:

Example of a conversation about an employment not continuing in the group: "I understand that this is a challenging situation, and I truly appreciate your effort."

Example of an employee that doesn't meet required goals: "We value your commitment and work. Unfortunately, I/we believe that the current work performance has not quite aligned with our expectations and standards."

Be clear and direct:

Example of terminating an employment: "After careful consideration, we have reviewed our budget and made the decision that we do not have the capacity to extend your temporary employment here."

Example of a conflict in the group: "We need to resolve conflicts within the team. I suggest we have an open discussion to better understand each other and find ways to solve the existing problems."

Example of approaching an employee that's dealing with personal issues: "I see that you've been a bit off lately, and I want to know how you are doing. Do you want to share what's going on so that we can discuss how best to support you?"

Explain the background without too many details:

"Unfortunately, I/we do not have the financial means to extend your employment."

"I perceive that the collaboration within the team has encountered some challenges affecting the working environment."

"I've noticed you haven't quite been yourself lately, and I'm concerned about your well-being."

Offer support and respect:

"I understand this is challenging; if you want, we can explore your options together."

"We can work together to improve the situation and create a more positive work environment."

"Let's discuss what you need to feel better, and how I can support you in the best possible way."

Avoid vague or overly optimistic phrases:

Avoid the following examples of phrases:

"It's just temporary, it may change."

"It's not personal, it's just about the group's needs."

"I'm sure it will go quickly to find a new employment."

Discuss next steps:

After communicating the decision, you should discuss any next steps and practical details about the employee's situation. This may include support from HR, occupational health service, notice period, last working day, return of work equipment, or any final documentation depending on the situation.

Documentation:

After the conversation, it is important to document it. Depending on the nature of the conversation, a simple note for yourself may be sufficient. If it is a more challenging conversation, more comprehensive documentation is needed that can be used as a basis if the case needs to be further investigated.

Documentation should include the date, time, location, and a summary of the discussion. This documentation may be crucial for presenting how the employee was informed and what was said or done in the meeting but also good for HR's knowledge and allows us as employers to follow up on the process.

Follow-up and support:

Offer support and resources for the employee in the current situation. Continue to be available for questions and concerns after the conversation. This shows that you care about the employee's well-being.

If something serious arises in the conversation

If you become aware of something serious or concerning that requires your intervention as a manager, HR is here to support you along the way. Feel free to ask the employee if confidentiality is important in the conversation and if what has been discussed should remain between you, or if you can take the issue further with HR. You always have the option to provide information anonymously about the employee to HR as we do not need to know specifically who it concerns.

In conclusion, handling difficult conversations requires empathy, patience, and clear communication. By following these guidelines and practicing these skills, you can make these conversations as smooth and respectful as possible, even in challenging situations.