

### **Four Suggestions for How to Have Difficult Conversations**

Difficult conversations are a necessary part of life at work. They are necessary, for example, if an employee develops a bad habit, or exhibits behavior that is inappropriate, disruptive, or unprofessional. If this happens, it means that you will need to have a conversation with the employee, and that can be difficult or uncomfortable.

We can think of employees' behavior that needs correction as belonging to one of four categories:

- **Significant Errors or Actions** – these may cause damage to a customer or to your company's reputation
- **Transgressions** – these may include poor or uneven performance
- **“Chemistry” Issues** – personality conflicts with other employees or customers
- **Housekeeping Issues** – tardiness, attendance problems

Regardless of the category that the employee's behavior falls in, the first step in dealing with the issue is to have a conversation. The inappropriate, disruptive, or mistaken behavior will need to be spelled out specifically, and the appropriate “fix” will likewise need to be clearly defined.

Following the four steps below can help you turn what might have been a negative, punishing experience into a positive, motivating one.

1. **Don't Put It Off.** Today is the day, and tomorrow will not be a better time to do it. The longer you let bad habits go on, the more entrenched the habit becomes (and the more likely the employee is to wonder, “Why are you bringing this up now?”) Putting it off doesn't make the problem any easier to deal with.
2. **Line Up Your “Ducks.”** Never start a difficult conversation without preparation. Review the person's work history. Is this the first time you've seen the behavior that you want to have changed, or is there a pattern of such incidents? Be prepared with the following four points:
  - **Make notes about how you're going to start** the conversation. Try them out loud (privately) a few times to make sure they work well. The tone you want to set is calm, supportive, and non-confrontive.
  - **Prepare a clear and unemotional statement of the issue** that is the heart of the matter. Be sure that it is expressed in terms of the employee's (problematic) behavior, and not in terms of his or her attitudes, intentions, or personality.

- **Be ready with a clear statement** of the new or changed behavior that you believe will correct the problem. A word of caution: remember to be flexible; the employee may actually come up with a better “fix” than the one you had in mind.
  - **Think ahead to how you will close** this conversation. You want the employee to walk away from it with an understanding of the problem, how to fix it, and the consequences if it is not fixed, but you don’t want to sound judgmental or “preachy.”
3. **The Meeting/Conversation Itself.** There are four guidelines that are important to follow to increase the likelihood that the employee will listen and learn from the conversation:
- **Have the conversation privately.** No one wants to have co-workers listening in to this kind of conversation.
  - **Set the tone from the beginning.** It’s your job to help an employee who has made a mistake learn how to avoid making such a mistake in the future. Be direct but also respectful. And treat him or her with dignity.
  - **Fix the Problem, Not the Blame.** Focusing on blame makes it sound as if you assume that the person intended to create the problem, and that’s seldom the case. You want the employee to participate in exploring the causes of the problem so that he or she can figure out a way to keep it from happening in the future. And that almost never happens if you start out blaming him or her.
  - **End on a Positive Note.** Recognize the person’s strengths and remind him or her how to use those strengths to help with the solution. Agree together on a time in the future when you two can review his or her progress.
4. **Follow Up.** Don’t overlook this important step! Not actually following up in the fastest way to be sure that your difficult conversation will not have the desired long-term effect.

Document the conversation (problem and mutually agreed-upon solution) in the employee’s file. Observe the employee’s subsequent behavior, and watch especially for evidence of *effort, however small*, that the employee makes. When you see it, say so to the employee; complimenting even small improvements helps the person feel recognized and appreciated, and reinforces the improvement you want to see.

Finally, take a moment to rate your own performance in the conversation. Were you able to stay calm and supportive? Did you give the employee chances to explain things from his or her point of view? Did the conversation end in a positive way?

Every difficult conversation is also a chance for you to learn to handle future difficult situations successfully. Developing employees means helping them find better ways to handle all aspects of the job, even the parts of the job that they may not like very much, or that are difficult for them. Approach these difficult conversations with the assumption that each of us can always find ways to improve. Your willingness to help the employee succeed will help offset any awkwardness of having to talk about uncomfortable mistakes.