

Handling Difficult Conversations with Employees

What Every Manager
Needs to Know

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PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT



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Handling Difficult Conversations with Employees: What Every Manager Needs to Know

Before a manager can understand how to conduct a “difficult” conversation with an employee, it helps to understand why we try to avoid such conversations. Usually, there are two main reasons:

1. **They are difficult**, and it’s human nature to avoid or delay the difficult. That’s generally true, but what you need to remind yourself of is the problems you’ll encounter later if you don’t have the difficult conversation now.

Delaying the conversation usually results in the problem getting worse, since most employees believe that if the manager doesn’t take time to fix a certain type of behavior or performance, then that behavior or performance is OK. Armed with that attitude, the employee gives you more of the same bad performance or behavior.

Then there’s the effect on others. That is, by delaying or avoiding, not only are you encouraging the person to get worse but you’re also discouraging good people who see what’s going on.

And when good people see bad behavior get ignored, good people leave – to be replaced by more problem people.

2. **No one ever had to hold one of these conversations with us.** We nearly always did what was expected to the best of our abilities, and without being told or warned.

That’s why we’re managers. We proved we’re self-motivated and don’t need a sit-down to go over the facts of life. That’s why good managers are in such short supply – they do the

When to put off the talk

There are some rules about when to delay holding such a conversation. What you're trying to prevent is the "stewing effect," where the employee has time to stew over – and get angry about – the matter.

With that in mind, try to avoid tough conversations:

- just before the end of the workday
- late Friday afternoon, if your operation normally doesn't work weekends, and
- just before you or the employee goes on vacation.

right thing without being told. And that's why not everyone can be a manager.

Be aware that many employees don't think the way you do or act the way you do. It's up to you to guide them.

The nuts and bolts of the conversation

Let's get to the actual conversation and how to handle it. Of course, every situation is different, and every conversation will be a little bit different. Still, by sticking with some do's and don'ts, you can control the conversation and reach your goals

Do's

- **Do be specific about what you want.** The mistake some managers make when shooting for a goal is to use general terms.

Example: A manager says, "You're too laid back. I want you to be more aggressive and proactive." Nice, safe terms, but the employee ends up thinking, "What's that mean?"

Instead, the manager could say, "I want you to call five ex-customers a week, find out why they left us and report back to me on what they said."

That sets out clear behavior and goals.

- **Do let the employee rant – a little.** Some people feel the need to blow off steam or maybe mount a defense, even a flimsy one, for their behavior. That's OK.

You don't want them to feel like they're on the witness stand and can't ramble a little. If they think the point of the conversation is for you to cross-examine them, that'll just give them an excuse to throw up their defenses and refuse to cooperate.

So let them go on for a while, and then steer the conversation back to the point – getting the results you want.

- **Do use “we.”** Try to get across the idea that the issue is a problem for everyone concerned.

That involves something as simple as saying, “We have a problem” or “We need to change.” Then the person on the other side of the desk realizes the behavior is important and affects everyone – but without finger-pointing.

- **Do focus on the problem, not the person.**
Bad example: “You’re too argumentative.”
Better: “The continual arguments are hurting our productivity.”

Don’ts

- **Don’t continually use “you.”** Putting all the responsibility on the employee is a conversational black hole that’s almost impossible to escape from.

The use of “you” – as in “You didn’t finish the job on time” – is an invitation to fight. Contrast that with: “We need to talk about why the job wasn’t finished on time.” No accusations, no blame. Just a conversation starter that works.

Let’s admit here that at some point you are going to have to use “you.” After all, we are talking about a specific person causing a specific problem. Just be aware that there are alternatives to continually using “you” in a negative way that kills the conversation.

- **Don’t use “however” or “but.”** Some managers think if they lead with a compliment, it’s easier to wade slowly into the problem.

A symptom of that thinking comes out in conversations that go something like: “You’ve done a pretty good job, but ...” and then the manager lowers the boom on the employee.

People aren’t fooled by that approach, and in fact it often gets them

angry and thinking, “She can never just say something positive.”

Consider substituting “and” for “but” and “however.” You’ll see how much smoother and positive the conversation can be.

Example: “You’ve done a pretty good job, and we need to talk about how to get back up to that level.”

- **Don’t feel as if you have to fill every silence.** In an especially tense situation, you’ll be tempted to fill in every silent pause.

Stay silent when there’s a lull in the conversation, and obligate the other person to fill in the silence. You’ll be surprised by the amount of information you get without even asking a question. We’ll give a real-life example of this later on.

Developing a system for holding difficult conversations

Conversations – especially those dealing with emotional issues – rarely follow a logical pattern or system. As we’ve said, every conversation is a little different.

You can’t shoehorn a conversation into a pattern or system. What you can do, however, is develop a method for getting the other person’s feedback and moving toward a desired result. Let’s look at a five-part conversation method and system that’s worked for many managers when they’re seeking a change in behavior or performance.

Let’s use the step-by-step example of dealing with someone who’s always negative and critical of others’ ideas.

1. “When you ... I feel ...” You can use this to set up the problem: “When you say, ‘That’s a dumb idea,’ I feel as if you’re being disrespectful to the person who offered the idea, and you discourage others from speaking up.”

Adjusting attitudes

Often, a difficult conversation takes place because someone has a “bad attitude” that’s usually exhibited in the way the person communicates with you, other employees, customers or vendors.

One way to address that is before the fact – by holding a “difficult conversation” with each employee early on – at the interview stage, if possible.

Explain that civil, respectful communication is part of the job, and that you’ll have zero tolerance for any breach.

That, of course, means you’ll have to abide by the standards, too.

2. Wait for their input. This is one of those points when your silence can be golden and when you can put into practice one of the “don’ts” we described earlier – don’t think you have to fill every silence.

Let your “When you” sentence hang and wait for a response. And here’s where it gets a little tricky, because you can’t be certain of the response.

The person may deny it, in which case you’ll have to give examples: “I can describe at least three times in the last week” Or the person may say, sincerely, “I didn’t realize I was doing that.”

Sometimes, too, the person will offer an excuse – valid or invalid. For instance, the response may be, “I’ve been losing a lot of sleep because of migraine headaches, so that may account for some of it.”

If you believe the excuse is valid, take steps to help or accommodate the employee. That’s what supervisors are supposed to do. Even if you do that, you usually still can move on to the next step.

3. “I would like” Here’s where you describe, specifically, the change in behavior you’d like to see: “I would like you to come to the next meeting with at least three ideas of your own on how we can improve.”

That sets the standard and results in positive terms: “This is what I want you to do,” instead of, “This is what I want you to stop doing.”

Consider how that works in any number of conversations involving performance or behavior. For instance, how about the person who’s always coming in late?

Negative: “I would like you to stop coming in late.”

Positive: “I would like you to be on time every day.”

4. “Because” In almost every situation, you have to provide a reason for requesting change (other than “because I said so”).

Again, try to stay positive. For example, say, “Because I know you

Quiz: Conversations that deal with conflict

Where you have people, you have conflicts. Your job is to use conversations to make sure employee conflicts don't get out of hand and create an atmosphere that's harmful to the group.

To test your knowledge of the best ways to use conversations to deal with conflict, answer True or False to the following questions. *(Answers on p. 9.)*

1. At the early stage of a minor conflict between two employees, you first should give them a chance to work things out without your involvement or intervention. In other words, don't jump in immediately to hold a conversation.

2. Let's say a situation has gotten to the point where you're involved in settling a dispute between two employees. You should get the two of them in a room together with you and encourage them to hash out the issue while you mediate.

have a lot of good ideas, and I think we'd all benefit from hearing them."

That beats the negative attack mode, such as, "Because we're tired of hearing your criticisms."

5. "What do you think?" You're asking straight-out for feedback here, and you're doing so with more than one purpose:

- You don't want the person to walk away with the feeling that he or she has been given some iron-fisted orders.
- You can move toward a commitment from the person to change.
- You'll get a real feel about whether the conversation worked and you're headed toward a desired goal.

Try the system the next time you need to have a difficult conversation, and see how it helps to get you where you want to go.

Keeping your cool

Let's agree that maybe the worst advice anyone could give you about conducting a difficult conversation is: "Don't lose your temper."

Few people intend to lose their temper, and most of us know it leads to problems later on. Granted, there is a school of thought that says a strategic loss of temper can have good results and make the right impression when nothing else seems to work.

But let's consider how losing your temper affects your position of leadership and authority – and, yes, your superiority – in a difficult conversation. We'll use a real-life example to make the point.

Answers to the quiz

1. *True.* You shouldn't have to jump in immediately and settle every conflict. Tell the warring sides you're going to give them a chance to settle things and move on, and that if they don't, you will.

That lets people know you trust them to act like adults.

Note: The one exception is if you reasonably believe that someone's safety is at risk or violence is likely. Then you're obligated to intervene right away. (See p. 12.)

2. *False.* That's an invitation to further the argument and engage in finger-pointing. First speak to them individually and see if you can settle things using that approach.

You'll undoubtedly get different sides of the same story – including who's really at fault – but that's OK. You can use the discrepancies as a basis for other conversations.

A. A male manager has a female employee who is abrasive, aggravates everyone in the group and is a marginal performer.

B. The manager calls a meeting with the employee with the purposes of changing her behavior and improving her performance.

C. He calmly informs her of the problem and the changes he'd like to see.

D. During the meeting, the female employee reverts to her old self by shouting, arguing and even calling the manager an *a**hole*.

E. The manager meets fire with fire and tells the employee she's a *b*****.

OK, can you spot the point at which the manager lost his advantage in the conversation? Of course you can – it was at stage E, when he lost his temper and operated at the level of the out-of-control employee.

Until that point, the manager could reasonably say, "I did everything right, and I'm perfectly justified in taking action against this employee."

At that point, though, the manager lost his edge in the conversation, and gave the

employee more ammunition to cause problems.

Can't you just hear her complaining later, "He called me a *b****!*"?

Covering the legal angles

A manager's worst nightmare comes true when he or she holds a difficult conversation to solve a problem, and the whole thing explodes into a threat of a lawsuit or an actual lawsuit from the employee involved in the conversation.

Mentioning the unmentionable: Hygiene

When someone has a body-odor problem, the rules for holding a difficult conversation don't change. You have to:

- State the problem plainly
- Get the person's input and response – maybe including a valid reason, such as medical problems
- Describe the change you want to see and why you want – it can be as straightforward as, "You must bathe daily" – and
- Get final feedback and agreement from the person.

Hundreds of managers have tried more subtle approaches to the problem – such as leaving a bar of soap at the person's work area – but none of those approaches have worked as well as holding a direct conversation.

That big problem commonly grows out of a small part of the conversation, when the manager says the wrong thing or promises something that can't be done.

Let's look at three of the common conversational legal traps and how to avoid them:

Confidential

In an attempt to draw people out, a manager may promise that "this is just between us" or "no one else will hear about this."

Be careful with that one, especially if you're not certain about what the person is about to tell you.

Example: A female employee who seems to be uncooperative finally says the problem is that she's being sexually harassed by another employee "but I'd prefer that you not mention it to anyone else – I don't want to create a problem."

The fact is, you *can't* keep something like that confidential. If you did, the employee could later say you knew about harassment and did nothing to stop it.

And that means the employee could sue, even though you were asked not to release the information.

The solution: If someone asks to speak "off the record" or requests confidentiality, you should respond:

"I can't promise that I won't speak to anyone else about this because, depending on what you tell me, the law may obligate me to act on the information you gave me, meaning I would have to share it with someone else, such as my supervisor. I can promise that if I do share the information, it will only be with someone who absolutely needs to know, and not as part of casual conversation."

You may encounter situation when you're not sure whether

the information is confidential. Because of that, the general rule is do not promise total confidentiality. If you later decide you can keep the information to yourself (such as, for instance, the details of a health problem), that's OK; you can.

But giving a blanket promise of confidentiality presents a legal risk for you and your organization.

Official

When you're a manager talking to an employee, remember this rule: "Everything's official."

In other words, don't think anything you say is "unofficial" or "off-the-cuff."

Let's look at an actual court case to illustrate what we mean.

An employee was forced to resign under suspicion of theft. The resignation came in lieu of the company's pressing charges against the employee.

Later, in casual conversation, a manager told another employee that "Bob was let go for stealing from the company."

As often happens, the comment got back to the terminated employee, who then sued the company for defamation.

His reason: He was never officially charged with the crime of theft, and it was inaccurate to say he was let go for "stealing."

The court bought the line of reasoning, and the company had to pay damages for defamation.

The lesson here isn't that you should be afraid to say anything. It's that you have to communicate in a responsible way and be aware that what you say can be interpreted to represent the company's beliefs and attitudes.

Courts will see it that way.

Quiz: Recognizing the threat of violence

We know workplace violence is a real threat. And we also know that a manager is obligated to confront and hold a conversation with anyone who poses a threat.

Understanding the roots and circumstances of violence can help you understand how and when to react. To get a better understanding, answer True or False to the following statements (*Answers on p. 13.*)

1. In most instances of workplace violence, most managers later said they had no warning that an incident might occur.
2. The majority of workplace assaults take place in white-collar or service environments, not in manufacturing or trades.
3. Nonfatal workplace assaults are committed against women and men in nearly equal numbers.

Stereotypical

Successful managers don't think about discriminating or stereotyping people. Be careful, however, about offhanded comments that give the perception of stereotyping – that is, believing that a person's behavior or capability is determined by race, gender, age, disability, etc.

Examples of what to avoid:

“We want you to act like a man.” “That rough language isn't what we expect from a woman.”

“Someone your age might not be up to that job.”

Continual use of that kind of statement will almost always lead to some sort of legal trouble for you and your organization.

To negotiate or not to negotiate?

Every conversation is different, and although you can build a system for framework for holding difficult conversations – and getting results from them – sometimes you'll have to make a judgment call about how to proceed.

One relevant area to consider: negotiation. Should you “give a little to get a little”?

You're the only one who can make that decision based on the situation and the person involved.

If you do decide to negotiate, consider the effective techniques that, more often than not, get results:

- **Highlight concessions.** Sometimes people don't realize they're getting a good deal, or at least one that benefits them in some way.

They may think you're still offering bargaining points instead of a final deal. It's up to you to convince them.

Answers to the quiz

1. *False.* Most studies of workplace violence show that attacks were preceded by threats known to the manager.

When an employee makes a threat, take it seriously.

2. *True.* It's a myth that most attacks take place in blue-collar work environments.

Statistics show the majority of violent acts are in white-collar work settings. So if you're in a service environment, don't think you're less likely to have a violent incident on your watch.

3. *True.* Workplace violence is gender-blind.

The number of violent acts committed against men is about the same as the number committed against women.

Source: NIOSH Facts: Violence in the Workplace.

One way to do that is to put flashing lights around your concession.

For instance:

Sounds like a bargaining point: "I'm willing to let you telecommute once a week."

Sounds like a big concession: "I'm willing to do something I've never done before – let you telecommute once a week."

- **Get the OK before offering a concession.** The last thing you want to do is offer someone something and then have to pull it back later when you realize the offer won't pass your boss's smell test.

If that happens, you can be fairly certain the employee won't trust you to negotiate again, and may even suspect that you weren't negotiating in good faith. That's a killer when you're holding a difficult conversation.

So check with your boss, or whoever has the authority, beforehand to get a list of OKs that can be used in negotiating.

And communicate to the other person that you have the power and confidence to make things happen. Example:

"Of course, Jane is the boss, but I'm confident we can agree on that proposal" (which has already been cleared by Jane).

- **Use third-party endorsements.** Of course, you'd never reveal the details of a deal to another employee, but it's OK to point to previous negotiations where you've followed through on your promises.

If you've had successful negotiations with others, highlight it:

"Talk to Bill. He'll tell you that I always follow through on my offers."

Realize that how much employees trust you to negotiate fairly is going to come from:

- a. their direct contact with you, and
- b. what others say about you.

The third-party endorsement helps you cover both those bases.

The differences between men and women

We've talked about the dangers and risks of conversational stereotyping.

Those dangers and risks are real.

What's also real is the fact that there are documented differences in the way men and women communicate. You wouldn't want to stereotype people based on those differences, but you do want to be aware of the differences and how you can address them in a difficult conversation.

Here's how to do it on both ends of the conversation – speaking and listening.

Making sure they hear you

- **Women** tend to give clues indicating they hear and understand – what communication experts call “active listening.”

The problem is that women sometimes will nod and say “uh-huh” even when they don't fully understand. To make sure you're getting through, ask a lot of follow-up questions and check to see that the answers show clear comprehension of what you're saying and what you want.

- **Men** are mainly passive listeners. Even when they “get it,” they tend to give off few verbal or physical clues, so don't get too discouraged if you don't get as much reaction as you might from a woman. Most men will speak up and say they

Big problem? Break it down

Sometimes the problem you're dealing with is complicated. There's no single easy fix and no straight path to results.

So, OK, you've got a big problem. Then the first step is to break it down into small ones – like the handshake – that can be taken care of individually.

Let's say you're dealing with someone who's been missing deadlines and complains, "Production gives me too much to do at the last minute."

You're probably not going to revamp an entire production process to accommodate one employee, so it's better to take the "small" approach:

"OK, let's go over each step and see if there's something we can do to create a little more time for you."

The lesson: Don't try to change the world in one conversation

don't understand, so you generally won't have to probe so much for a clarity check.

Making sure you hear them

Women are good storytellers. They like to provide details that build to a conclusion or point. That means listening to them sometimes requires a little more patience and concentration as they reach a grand finale.

- **Men** get to the point more quickly – sometimes too quickly. In doing so, they can omit crucial details.

That means when you're on the listening end, you may have to ask them more questions to make sure the fine points don't get missed.

Just remember ...

The observations here are based on years of research and documentation about habits and tendencies continually observed in men and women.

That doesn't mean every woman or every man you deal with will display those habits and tendencies, and you shouldn't assume they will.

The research findings do come in handy, however, when you're trying to understand why someone doesn't seem to be responding the way you hoped.

What about the 'Generation Gap'?

The research tells us there are clear lines between how men and women communicate. But what about the differences when comparing generations? You know, Baby Boomers, Generation-X, Generation-Y and so on.

It would be foolish to deny that people have different career expectations at different stages of their lives. There's little

Termination fallout

Right after a termination, the anxiety level is high and people are on edge. You'll have to deal with that, and at different levels:

With other members of the group. Acknowledge that someone's gone. Ignoring it just creates more tension, gives the appearance that something covert is going on and fuels the rumor mill. How to handle it:

- Avoid the "why."
- Explain the short-term plan.

With departments outside your group. Often, others in your organization will have had contact and business with the former employee. The approach in that situation is to have a one-by-one sit-down with the supervisors of those departments.

Explain to them that Bill has left and that you're establishing new contact people.

research to refute that idea.

The good news for managers: Most of the research shows very little differences in communicating among the generations.

One group might say "ya know" or "cool" more than another, but when it comes to basic listening and communicating, no generation has a clear edge or disadvantage. You can safely approach a difficult conversation in pretty much the same way with a member of any age group.

In short, there is little evidence to show there's a Generation Gap for communication styles (though we'll exempt teenagers from the mix).

Documenting your conversations

Often, you'll want to consider keeping a record of your conversations and getting the employee to sign off on the documentation. The reasons for doing so are varied, such as:

- You want a "paper trail" to support a later decision, such as disciplinary action
- The employee has a history of later insisting, "I never said that," or
- You want a written summary of the conversation and agreed-to items, just so you and the employee are clear on how to proceed.

Any discussion about keeping good documentation should be accompanied by going over what not to keep – what to avoid or omit.

Start by remembering that if you place something about an employee in a file, you're pretty much committed to keeping it there. That's why you'll want to be careful about what goes into a file.

For instance, if you wrote a note saying, “You’re a wonderful employee,” and a month later you walked into HR asking that the employee be fired, you can’t just remove the “wonderful employee” note from the file.

Now let’s list examples of what to avoid when writing or including documentation:

Opinions. For example: “Suzie is lazy,” would show too much opinion. Though it’s OK to say, “Suzie was late with three assignments.”

Inserting opinions leaves too much room for argument, and opinions can be used as the basis for a charge that you “had it in for” the employee.

Promises. Even just in conversation, you should always be careful about promises made to an employee. But be especially careful about putting promises in writing or wording an agreement in such a way that it appears to be a promise.

Example: “If you complete all your assignments on time over the next 90 days, we’ll reconsider your request for promotion.” That sounds innocent enough, but some people might interpret that as an agreement to promote the employee.

Better: “After you’ve completed all your assignments on time over the next days, we’ll meet again to discuss your future with this company.”

Medical information. Some medical info is governed by a federal privacy law known as HIPAA, so try to avoid placing too much or the wrong kinds of information in unprotected files.

It’s impossible to account for every type of medical situation, but, for example, it’s OK to have a note saying, “Jack took 4 weeks of FMLA leave.” Contrasting that, you’ll want to avoid saying something like, “Jack took FMLA leave to get treatments for cancer.” That’s too much detail.

See HR for help with storing confidential medical info.

Anything you don't want the employee to see. Employees have a right to see what's in their files so your best bet is to check with HR about what goes into a file and to give the employee a copy when something is placed in a file.

In or out?

We can't cover every possible instance of what should go in or be left out of documentation, but let's go down a list of items as examples and indicate In or Out:

- Political affiliations or memberships? *Out*. That's private info.
- Records of absenteeism? *In*. That's part of standard employment records.
- Arrests? *Out*. That's not part of the employment record except if the arrest was work-related.
- Credit records or notices of pay garnishment? *Out*. That's private.
- Promotion dates? *In*. Part of standard employment records.
- Disciplinary suspensions? *In*. Part of standard employment records.

Delivering discipline

OK, you've had the difficult conversations, and you've given it your best shot to turn the situation around.

Nothing has worked, and now it's time to move to another difficult conversation: the punishment phase.

When this conversation is handled correctly, it can lead to that improvement you've been trying to pull out of the employee. When the conversation is poorly handled, the slide downhill continues.

Let's look at the main pieces and the best ways to handle them:

Timing

After continual warnings and promises, the problem pops up again.

Should you allow for a cool-down period before delivering the discipline? How long should you wait to deal with it?

Not long. Take actions as soon as possible after the infraction. You want the events to be fresh in the employee's mind and in yours.

Of course, you may need a little time to make sure you've gathered all the facts, but make your move as soon as you're ready.

Getting into it

Some supervisors are tempted to start the meeting with a little small talk

"How're the kids?" "Did you see the end of last night's game?" Don't do it. The employee has to know right off that this is serious stuff that needs to be covered immediately.

You may encounter the employee who tries to turn the meeting into a social event by breaking in with some chit-chat, maybe even business-related talk, like the day's production figures.

You can cut off that approach with: "Before we discuss that, there's something else we need to cover right away."

Making the right impression

You've had talks with this employee before, and because of that, the employee may think this is another one of those "little talks."

Make it clear that the purpose of this meeting is to officially discipline the employee for a failure in performance or behavior. (In some organizations, the policy is to accompany the talk with a document that details the failure and the punishment. That may depend on how severe the punishment is.)

Emphasize that the meeting is "official" and part of the disciplinary process – to erase any false impressions the employee may have

that this isn't really all that serious.

Termination: The toughest conversation

When the time comes that an employee has reached the end of the line, you may be called upon to hold a manager's toughest conversation: the termination talk.

The general guide here is that the better prepared you are, the more likely it is that the conversation will proceed to its logical conclusion without going off the rails.

So this conversation is one you'll want to "script" as much as any other. Know exactly what you're going to say and exactly what words you're going to use. Termination is one of those times when precision makes a difference.

Your overall goals for the termination talk should be to:

- **Place a time limit on each segment of the conversation.**

It's not as if you're going to keep checking your watch to see if you're on schedule, but you want to have a feel for how long each part of the talk should take. That prevents rambling.

- **Maintain a serious, even tone.**

You can't control the tone of the employee's reaction; you can control your own.

So if you encounter an employee who shouts or otherwise gets emotional, you have to maintain your even keel.

- **Have a clear idea of how you want to end the conversation.**

Too many termination talks go on for too long because the manager doesn't know how to finish. It can be as simple as standing up and saying, "Joe, I do want to wish you the best and hope that things work out for you." And then move on to the next stage: handing in company property, signing final paperwork, etc.

However you decide to do it, have a plan in mind and stick to it as much as possible.

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