

Ten Tips for Handling Difficult Conversations in the Workplace

by Jane C Woods

Do you sometime find yourself putting off those awkward conversations for fear of getting it wrong, sometimes even for years? In my experience most of us, even if we can be assertive in some situations, have one area where we find it difficult to say what we really mean and will put up with all sorts of difficulties to avoid confronting a problem. Often it is work where we find ourselves biting our tongue, storing up resentments, and treading on eggshells for fear of offending someone.

When we find ourselves unable to tackle a problem, we often let our frustrations out in an uncontrolled way at inappropriate moments, and usually to the wrong person! That's definitely not good for business! Equally, making staff that work with us feel disgruntled or aggrieved is not good practice either; they are unlikely to give a good service if they have just had a telling off. We need to treat staff and colleagues as adults in order to get an adult response back. If we don't, and treat them like a parent ticking off a naughty child, we're likely to get child like behaviour back and that is definitely not good for business!

Ten tips for managing difficult conversations at work.

One

Before you meet, think carefully about ***what you want the outcome to be***. Thinking time is invaluable; if you launch in without it you are likely to let your emotions run away with you. Start at the end and work backwards. What do you want to happen as a result of your discussion? For example, if you have to speak to someone about their behaviour at work presumably you want their behaviour to improve and for them to conform to the norms prevailing in the workplace, *not* that they go off upset and angry and feel that everyone is against them leading to less efficient work, a bad atmosphere, recriminations and so on.

Two

If possible, give the other person some ***advance notice*** that you'd like to speak with them. '*Can we catch up for 20 minutes later this morning, I'd like to discuss something with you*' for example. If you grab someone unawares they are more likely to feel defensive and less likely to respond in the way that you would wish.

Three

Choose a ***place*** where you cannot be overheard or seen. This is respectful of the other person's feelings and dignity, particularly if you are in a senior position to them. But don't choose so remote a place that it appears threatening...dragging someone off behind the bike sheds may be viewed as intimidating or worse!

Four

Choose **the time** carefully. First thing in the morning is rarely good as people are still tired and acclimatising to work, and last thing in the working day is not good either as people need to get home, catch trains etc and it also deprives them of the opportunity to either confide in a friend or seek clarification later from you. A better time might be just before a lunch break when they have time to go out of the workplace if they wish and consider what has been said, but also to return and speak further if they need to. If they are very angry it also gives them a space to cool down.

Five

Be aware that your anxious feelings about the difficult conversation ahead may show up in your **body language**. Because you may feel threatened yourself you could be giving a negative message before you even speak. To explain, you have probably heard about the flight or flight syndrome; when we feel under threat our bodies flood with adrenalin to prepare us to either fight that brontosaurus or run like mad away from it. Check out that your body is not giving this defensive message. If it is, the person you are speaking with will pick this up and their own flight/fight response will kick in and that is a recipe for disaster. Try and stay relaxed with arms hanging loose, for example, not folded in front of you, or fists clenched down by your side. Take some deep calming breaths and, if you feel smiling to be inappropriate, do try not to frown or grimace.

Six

Before you begin you need to **check out that you have understood the situation** properly, for example by paraphrasing the problem as you see it in as non judgemental way as you can. It may be that you say something like, 'It seems that when I do so and so you become very angry'. They may say, 'No, I was just having a bad day and it was nothing to do with you.' At the very least, stating the issue means everyone knows what they are talking about.

Seven

Do not label the person. In the same way as best practice in dealing with children suggests we should not say 'Oh you naughty girl', thereby giving them a negative label and nowhere to go with it, with adults it's helpful to follow the same principles. **Describe the behaviour** that is causing *you* a problem (And note that it may not actually be causing anyone else a problem so make sure you own it). 'When you do so and so I feel...' is a good start. The important point is to be specific about the behaviour that is in question. A non specific 'You are so irritating' is not helpful and will produce an understandable defensive response. And it probably isn't true. Something they do irritates *you* but another person might find it an endearing quality.

Eight

Consider carefully what it is that you need to say, and **take responsibility** for it. That means you need to use the word 'I'. For example, you might say to someone:

'I wanted to have a private word with you because there is something that's been bothering me and I'd like to talk about it with you. I appreciate that you may think you are doing me a favour but when you volunteer me for jobs when I am not around, however, I feel...' and say just what you feel. Is it angry, upset, put upon, undermined, just say what you actually feel. This means you have to stop and think about exactly what you feel, hence the importance of some preparation time. No one can argue against how you feel. It is a powerful statement. What might be difficult for you is recognising what your feelings actually are and being confident enough to share them. If you can it makes your point much more powerfully

Nine

Having actually managed to get out the difficult words you wanted to say you might be tempted to stop but that's not enough. What you need to do now is **say what you would like to happen**. If you can do this respectfully you have a reasonable chance of success. Similarly, when you have to make a complaint about non delivery of supplies, either by phone or maybe in a letter, if you are polite but specific about what you'd like to happen there is a much greater chance of getting it. For example, *'I would be grateful if you could replace this faulty item today'*, or *'I would appreciate it if in future you would check with me first before volunteering my services to others.'* Remember to think long term so even though you might be able to secure a quick victory is it helpful in the long term? It's always best practice to treat people how you expect to be treated, with **respect**.

Ten

It would be great if, having followed all the above, the other person just said how sorry they were and agreed to whatever you wanted. Sometimes it does happen like that but more often than not you will have to move on to the next stage and **consider a jointly agreed solution or outcome**. This is where real negotiation and understanding begins. For example, having made your point you may say, 'I will stay late on this occasion but in future please give me notice/ask someone else/etc. It may be that, having understood their point of view you feel able to bend a little in your demands, or it may be that you can do no more than agree to disagree. You will have made your point, stood up for yourself and hopefully have gained some respect from the other person.

General Points

There are two general points to bear in mind with all the above:

Listen to what the other person is saying, *really listen* and respond but try not to get sidetracked from your original point. So, for example, they might tell you how pressurised they are and overwhelmed with work. Don't ignore what they have said but if you feel your point is still valid, say, '*I understand that you have lots of work on, however, when you talk with the customers this pressure is causing you sound irritated and we lose business*'. You might then ask them how to deal with it. '*How do you suggest we tackle this problem?*'

The second point is that we have only been dealing with words but how those words are said is at least as significant as the words themselves. **Tone of voice** is all important; remember words count for a small percentage of the message received, in fact, just 7%! Try to speak calmly and evenly, and practise a few deep breaths before you begin.

So, in summary, be respectful but firm, think long term and don't expect to succeed first time. If this has been a long standing issue you may find you have to repeat the process. Be patient, it will work!

Be the best that you can be!

Jane C Woods