



Dealing with difficult conversations at work

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One of the most challenging aspects of a manager's job is having difficult conversations at work. Karen Higginbottom gets advice from experts on how managers can approach five difficult issues in the workplace and come to a successful resolution

Managers in the UK often rate their ability to handle a difficult conversation more highly than others, according to a 2012 survey by Learning Consulting Partnership. The research found more than two-thirds of managers rated themselves as extremely or very confident in their ability to handle a difficult conversation compared to HR managers who felt that only one in five managers were confident in addressing difficult conversations. "We have a real problem in the UK," remarks Cary Cooper, Professor of Organisational Health and Psychology at Lancaster University Management School. "We appoint managers based on performance but forget about social skills. I think managers from the shop floor to the top floor don't have the social and inter-personal skills to have difficult conversations and aren't trained to develop them."

What is common to all five issues below is that managers need to prepare for the unexpected and keep their communication succinct, comments Rona Beattie, Professor of Human Resource Development, GCU London. "Preparation before you meet with the individual is key. Mentally rehearse what you want to say particularly if you're an inexperienced manager. It's also important that you have the conversation in a private environment."

Below is advice for managers on how to handle five common and difficult issues at work:

Poor Performance

This all depends on the context of the situation, says Beattie. "Is it a new employee who is not clear on the standards expected? Is it a good employee but there has been a drop in performance? The latter would tend to suggest an under-lying problem that might be nothing to do with work." If it's a case of performance improvement, then the manager must have evidence of poor performance, advises Beattie. "The conversations that you have with the individual must be related to the behaviour of the individual and not the personal characteristics of the individual. You need to check they know what is expected of them and be clear as a manager that they know what they need to do. Is it a training and development need? Once you're satisfied that you've been clear on what is expected of the individual, then you both need to agree on what happens next. The manager needs to check that performance is improving against what has been agreed between both parties."

Bullying

Managers shouldn't just go up to the bully but sit down with both parties individually and find out what is going on from their point of view, advises Alex Efthymiades, director at Consensio Partners, mediation and workplace conflict consultancy. If the manager has the skills in conflict resolution or mediation, then they should try and manage the issue, she says. "Once they've sat down with both parties and asked what is driving the behaviour and the impact on each of the parties, then the manager should facilitate a joint meeting with both parties," she says. "They then need to follow the principles of mediation and make sure it's a confidential meeting and maintain impartiality and don't make assumptions about either party. The latter requires good listening skills. The principle of self-determination is also important and this means that both parties are not told what to do. Instead, the manager listens and allows the parties to speak to each other in a safe and confidential environment and allow the parties to come up with their own solutions."

Appearance

Take care not to impose rules for rules sake, warns Jane Sunley, chief executive of people and performance specialists Purple Cubed. "Presentation at work is all about appropriateness to the surroundings and culture." The best way to handle this topic is to set the ground rules from day one and make sure that people know what is acceptable and what isn't, advises Sunley. "Then it's easy to have a straight conversation if things lapse. Use a pre-emptive statement such as 'Can I give you some honest feedback?'" Sunley recommends moving straight on to addressing the issue whether it's scruffy clothes or bad body odour. "You must assume they are oblivious to whatever the conversation is about so be direct but also supportive. Linking the conversation to a business issue ensures that the individual doesn't feel this is a personal vendetta."

Redundancy

It's vital to maintain the dignity of the individual when a manager is informing an individual they are being made redundant as part of a widespread compulsory redundancy programme, advises Cooper. "You need to stress that the individual is a good worker and explain why the organisation is making people redundant and make it clear that it has nothing to do with under-performance." A larger organisation can offer outplacement services, adds Cooper. "If a manager works for a large enough organisation with resources, then they can help the individual find another job or point them in the direction of the out-reach programme." It's the job that is being made redundant, not the person, advises Beattie. "Prepare for people being in tears or being relieved and stress it's not performance-based. If you give an individual enhanced redundancy terms that can help."

Lateness

Again this topic is strewn with potential pitfalls as there can often be a personal explanation for an individual's unpunctuality, warns Beattie. "The manager has to gather the evidence that an individual is late before suggesting a meeting. I'd advise a manager to ask why the individual has been late. For example, it could be a working parent coming in late and you could find out there a grandparent who has been looking after the children has been hospitalised. If it's going to be a case of short-term lateness then allow it as they can make up the time later as long as performance isn't affected." If the individual doesn't have personal or family problems but is still

unpunctual then the manager needs to explain the consequences of their lateness for them, their team and organisation, says Beattie. "Then the individual has to agree with the manager to stick to certain hours. This can then be followed up by the manager and monitored."