

How to Handle Difficult Conversations

When You Feel Like Running and Hiding

| *“Good coaches and mentors need to give honest feedback while being empathetic.”*

—Vani Kola, Venture Capitalist¹

Odds are you’ll face a lot of potentially uncomfortable conversations when managing people. Seventy-one percent of leaders give feedback to their direct reports on a weekly or daily basis.² But these types of talks don’t have to be scary. Listening to the other person’s perspective and communicating with them on a human level can ease much of the awkwardness and tension that tends to accompany these sensitive topics. By ironing out the details of your approach now, you won’t have to rely on searching for just the right words in the moment.³

PART 1 | WHY is it important to have difficult conversations?

Many managers and leaders avoid giving feedback due to discomfort with emotional or defensive reactions, or a culture that does not value feedback. Difficult conversations may not always seem necessary—after all, isn’t it better to avoid conflict wherever possible?

In fact, the belief that managers should only give positive feedback may be misleading and even harmful.⁴ For example, one study revealed that not being able to give feedback to underperforming employees costs businesses \$6,000–\$8,000 per day.⁵ Stepping up to resolve conflicts at your business is essential for two reasons:

1. It demonstrates emotional intelligence.

For leaders, emotional intelligence is twice as important as IQ.⁶ Emotional intelligence—for instance, the ability to understand your effect on others—accounts for 90 percent of what moves people up the ladder when IQ and technical skills are roughly the same.⁷ Daniel Goleman, a psychologist who put the concept of emotional intelligence on the map in the workplace, says leaders who manage with empathy experience increased employee satisfaction and decreased turnover.⁸

2. It prevents larger issues from coming up.

The Society for Human Resource Management states that failing to address tensions can lead to larger issues including absenteeism, turnover, unionization and litigation.⁹ While there are ways to minimize conflict, such as clear expectations, effective management and a fair process for airing grievances, trying to avoid it when it does arise can have negative consequences.

PART 2 | WHAT are the components of the conversation?

When faced with tough conversations, Jean-Francois Manzoni, professor of human resources and organizational development at INSEAD, tells us avoidance is not the answer. The key, Manzoni says, is to have these interactions in a manner that results in “a better outcome: less pain for you, and less pain for the person you’re talking to.”¹⁰

There are two main approaches to difficult conversations, each with their own unique steps:

- **Collaborative approach**
- **Short and direct approach**

COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Consider using the collaborative approach for contentious conversations. The components of a collaborative conversation are:

PREPARATION

> Listen

Where is your discussion? Will there be distractions?

To Do: Have the conversation face-to-face, if possible. Limit distractions including e-mail and calls.

> Calm

The conversation may bring about anticipatory stress or a negative reaction.

To Do: Focus on tools to remain calm, whether they are deep breaths, a walk around the block, etc. As meditation expert Dandapani says, “Emotions are a powerful tool. Controlled and directed they can manifest amazing things. Uncontrolled they can wreak havoc on your life.”¹¹

IN THE CONVERSATION

> Framing

There can be a tendency to want to say “This is a challenging discussion,” but try to avoid it.

To Do: Because this is not a short and direct termination conversation, frame it in a positive or neutral light.

> Ask, Don't Assume

When something goes awry, we often tend to think of the worst-case scenario.

To Do: Ask open-ended questions to better understand the situation and the other person's viewpoint.¹²

> Acknowledgement, Caring & Respect

These principles allow you to relate positively to the other person.¹³

To Do: Acknowledge the person's experience and view. You may even disagree with it. But it's important to acknowledge it, show you care and demonstrate respect.

WRAP-UP

> Plan Solutions

At the end of the conversation, you may want to get out of the office ASAP, smile, shake and move on. But it's important to stick around and look for solutions with the other person.

To Do: Cement the conversation and collaborate by working together on a plan. What will happen, and when? When will you and the other person check in again?

> Check In

Don't lose the opportunity to check in and re-establish a connection with the other person.

To Do: As Dr. Fred Kofman, UFM professor of leadership, says, “Check in on the I, the WE, and the IT.”¹⁴ Here, the “I” is your expression of your own values, the “WE” is the way you relate positively to the other person, and the “IT” is the shared goals you achieve together.¹⁵

> Inventory

At this point you may think “That's over ... I lived.” This is an opportunity to keep learning and growing.

To Do: Evaluate your process, and think about ways you could make it better the next time you need to have a tough conversation.¹⁶

SHORT AND DIRECT APPROACH

Compared to the collaborative approach, the short and direct approach may be more appropriate when an employee is not meeting their goals. The components of a short and direct conversation are:

PREPARATION

> Opening

A routine opening to a short and direct conversation can save you mental energy and get the attention of the other person.¹⁷

To Do: Write up a standard opening to conversations about employee performance, and practice it before the conversation begins.¹⁸

IN THE CONVERSATION

> Dialog

Before sharing your point of view, ask your employee for their own assessment of their performance.

To Do: Ask them about how they think they're doing in meeting their goals and about the metrics they use to measure their performance.¹⁹

> Your Perspective

State the way you see the situation, finding commonalities or differences with their perspective.

To Do: If you partially agree with their assessment, you can just add in areas where you think they need to improve. If you disagree with their assessment, explain how you arrived at your view, and ask if they have any information that you may have missed.²⁰

> List Non-negotiables

Now is the time to set expectations for your employee, while demonstrating a desire to help them be successful.

To Do: Clearly articulate areas that are not open to negotiation, such as metrics like completion rates or deadlines.²¹

> Be Specific

Compared to vague critiques, specific examples of behaviors are objective and difficult to refute.

To Do: Offer straightforward guidelines for what you want your employee to do to change.²²

WRAP-UP

> **Shared Plan**

Working in tandem with your employee, you can come up with a plan to improve their performance.

To Do: First, ask your employee about what they might do to address their performance issue. Then, you can fill in additional suggestions for improvement.

> **Timeline & Communication**

An agreed timeline and plan for communication can keep you and your employee on the same page.

To Do: Make it clear how long they have to get back on track and what will follow if their performance doesn't get better.

PART 3 | HOW should I apply the steps to my conversation?

Now that you've looked at two different approaches to sticky conversations, make a plan to apply those steps in the near future.

Instructions: Think about a difficult conversation you know you need to have. Decide whether you want to use a collaborative approach or a short and direct approach. Fill in your initial thoughts in the "Notes" section, based on each of the components of the approach you chose (from Part 2). Write the steps you will take in the "Action Steps" section.

EXAMPLE

Conversation: Talking to my direct report Nina about resolving a conflict with her coworker Greta

Approach: Collaborative Short and Direct

Component	Notes	Action Steps
Listen	The week of my conversation with Nina will be busy, so I will need to make sure I'm not distracted by incoming calls and alerts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set my office as the meeting location. 2. Before Nina arrives, put computer on standby and phone on silent mode. 3. When she arrives, close the office door.
Calm	I typically feel stressed when the topic of conflicts within my team comes up. I want to control my stress so I can focus on the conversation when I'm talking to Nina.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Get some fresh air outside in the office garden for 10 minutes before our conversation.
Framing	Despite the negative feelings I have about team conflict, I should try to frame this situation in a more neutral light.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Come up with an intro to the conversation that states my understanding of the issue neutrally.
Ask, Don't Assume	Right now I'm assuming that Nina and Greta don't get along in general and that their conflict will be ongoing through their time working together, but it might be an isolated event that can be worked through easily.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write three open-ended questions to ask Nina to get more information from her on the situation.
Acknowledgment, Caring & Respect	I care about Nina as an individual, so I should use techniques that show her I acknowledge how she feels.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use active listening to recap what Nina says to show I'm understanding her concerns. 2. Don't judge what she has to say, and allow her to express her feelings about the situation.

Component	Notes	Action Steps
Plan Solutions	I should leave enough time so Nina and I can work together to come up with a plan for tackling this, and I would also like to have a way to jot down some notes.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have a notebook handy to document plan. 2. Allocate an extra 15 minutes in the meeting for planning. 3. Collaborate on a plan for Nina to work through her conflict with Greta, including steps Nina will take and when she will take them. 4. Decide on a time to check in on how the plan went.
Check In	<p>I: Do I feel good about the outcome?</p> <p>WE: Did we relate positively in this interaction?</p> <p>IT: Did we achieve the results we were looking for?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create an event on the calendar for a check-in at a later date. 2. At the check-in, follow up with Nina on the outcome of the plan we made.
Inventory	After my conversation with Nina—while it’s still fresh in my mind—I should think about what went well and what didn’t go well so I can make it better next time. Writing it out in a reflection will help reinforce my takeaways and give me a place to reference the info when I need it again.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Write up to three things I did that were successful in the conversation—make a note to repeat those behaviors next time. 2. Write up to three things I did that were less successful in the conversation—make a note to avoid those behaviors next time. 3. Brainstorm up to three ways I can be more effective in future conversations.

YOUR BUSINESS CONVERSATION

Conversation: _____

Approach: Collaborative Short and Direct

Component	Notes	Action Steps

Component	Notes	Action Steps

DID YOU KNOW?

Women prefer to get more positive process feedback (comments on what is going well as they are completing a task) and less negative outcome feedback (an overall negative evaluation of the task they completed).²³

- ¹ Vani Kola, *Ability to Have Difficult Conversations Is a Key Leadership Differentiator*, Medium (Oct. 3, 2018), <https://medium.com/@VaniKola/ability-to-have-difficult-conversations-is-a-key-leadership-differentiator-143a025309f1> (accessed April 5, 2019).
- ² William A. Gentry & Stephen Young, *Busting Myths About Feedback: What Leaders Should Know*, Center for Creative Leadership (April 2017), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320890614_Busting_Myths_about_Feedback_What_Leaders_Should_Know (accessed April 4, 2019).
- ³ Rebecca Knight, *How to Handle Difficult Conversations at Work*, Harvard Business Review (Jan. 9, 2015), <https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-handle-difficult-conversations-at-work> (accessed April 4, 2019).
- ⁴ William A. Gentry & Stephen Young, *Busting Myths About Feedback: What Leaders Should Know*, Center for Creative Leadership (April 2017), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320890614_Busting_Myths_about_Feedback_What_Leaders_Should_Know (accessed April 4, 2019).
- ⁵ Tanya Menon & Leigh Thompson, *Stop Spending, Start Managing: Strategies to Transform Wasteful Habits*, Harvard Business Review Press (2016).
- ⁶ *What Makes a Leader?*, Harvard Business Review (Dec. 5, 2016), <https://hbr.org/video/5236216251001/what-makes-a-leader> (accessed April 4, 2019).
- ⁷ Vani Kola, *Ability to Have Difficult Conversations Is a Key Leadership Differentiator*, Medium (Oct. 3, 2018), <https://medium.com/@VaniKola/ability-to-have-difficult-conversations-is-a-key-leadership-differentiator-143a025309f1> (accessed April 5, 2019).
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ *Managing Workplace Conflict*, Society for Human Resource Management (Sept. 11, 2018), <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesand-tools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/managingworkplaceconflict.aspx> (accessed April 4, 2019).
- ¹⁰ Rebecca Knight, *How to Handle Difficult Conversations at Work*, Harvard Business Review (Jan. 9, 2015), <https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-handle-difficult-conversations-at-work> (accessed April 4, 2019).
- ¹¹ @DandapaniLLC, Twitter (March 6, 2019), <https://twitter.com/dandapanillc>.
- ¹² Aisha Langford, *The Art of Having Difficult Conversations*, Inside Higher Ed (June 12, 2015), <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2015/06/12/advice-how-have-difficult-conversations-essay> (accessed April 4, 2019).
- ¹³ Fred Kofman, *How to Have Difficult Conversations and Stay True to Yourself*, Lean In <https://leanin.org/education/managing-difficult-conversations> (accessed April 4, 2019).
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Daisy Wademan Dowling, *Giving Effective Feedback When You're Short on Time*, Harvard Business Review (Feb. 16, 2015), <https://hbr.org/2015/02/giving-effective-feedback-when-youre-short-on-time> (accessed April 5, 2019).
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Sabina Nawaz, *How to Talk to an Employee Who Isn't Meeting Their Goals*, Harvard Business Review (Feb. 27, 2019), <https://hbr.org/2019/02/how-to-talk-to-an-employee-who-isnt-meeting-their-goals> (accessed April 4, 2019).
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ William A. Gentry & Stephen Young, *Busting Myths About Feedback: What Leaders Should Know*, Center for Creative Leadership (April 2017), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320890614_Busting_Myths_about_Feedback_What_Leaders_Should_Know (accessed April 4, 2019).