

Start to appreciate, not dread, difficult conversations at work



Whether you're giving difficult feedback to an employee, approaching your supervisor with a problem, or having an uncomfortable conversation with a peer — handling difficult conversations at work is enough to fill anyone with dread. Still, these conversations need to happen. In fact, you should want them to.

Difficult conversations may be challenging, but they're also incredible opportunities. It's a chance to help an employee learn and improve their career, an opportunity to grow closer to another team member, or simply a chance to prevent a small problem from becoming a larger one. Difficult conversations will always have to happen, but how you handle them is the difference between fulfilling that sense of impending doom, or having a meaningful experience with a positive outcome.

Ultimately, how you approach the conversation is what sets it up for either success or failure. In the end, while the topic may vary, one thing will always be consistent — the human element. When it comes to difficult conversations at work, that angle will always set you up for success.

When having difficult conversations at work, focus on observations and actions

Difficult conversations are, by their very nature, difficult and are likely to be somewhat tense. Emotions will be high for an employee receiving negative feedback on their performance, or being reprimanded for their interactions with customers or coworkers. That's why it's necessary to keep conversations as factual as

possible.

There's room to discuss an employee's feelings on a matter. However, the centerpiece of your discussion should be around something tangible. This keeps it objective, harder to debate, and less likely to be interpreted as an interpersonal attack.

For example, don't simply tell an employee they seem overwhelmed and like they're falling behind on work. Instead, point to a few examples of work they have recently submitted late. Ask them what's going on, and how they're doing. However, try not to get in the weeds on each example, use each example as evidence of an overall trend.

Similarly, if you're concerned about an employee's behavior, don't talk about it at a high level. Additionally, *never* tell them they have a bad attitude, unless your goal is to shut down the conversation immediately. Instead, approach with a few examples. "When talking to a customer the other day, you told them you couldn't help with their problem, that's another department." Then move on to discuss the kind of service the organization tries to provide and if these actions do or don't line up with it.

If your goal is to change a behavior, then approach a difficult conversation at work by focusing on that behavior.

Don't cast judgment on someone's actions

Similarly, focusing on the actions themselves is a more neutral way of approaching it. Try hard not to cast judgment on the actions someone took, as this is more likely to make them defensive. Avoid loaded words with negative connotations. For example, telling someone that an assignment didn't meet the criteria provided, is a more neutral fact-based statement than telling them their work wasn't up-to-par. The latter is likely to feel like an attack.

Perception is sort of reality

Everyone is accountable for other people's perception of them. Wait, what? It may sound odd at first. Many people interpret things differently, how can you be responsible for how others view your actions? It's true, you can't control how others view you. However, it's also not an excuse to be rude, impolite, or disrespectful and then claim "they interpreted it the wrong way." Ultimately, harm done is harm done.

While it may not seem like it, this is actually a very constructive angle from which to approach a difficult conversation at work. You can't know what a person's motivations for their actions are, but you can tell them what the perception of those around them is. Say an employee often makes negative sounding comments in meetings and there are concerns about their attitude. It's not productive to tell them they have a negative attitude. However, it's hard to argue if you tell them that based on comments like X, Y, and Z, others are perceiving them as negative and disengaged.

This also works in a 1 on 1 situation. "Recently a few of your projects have arrived late or incomplete, from my vantage point, it seems like you're a little overwhelmed by your workload right now. If that's the case, I'd love to discuss what I can do to help."

They may be able to debate the intention of their comments/actions, but they can't easily debate how others perceive them.

Apply the golden rule

When approaching a difficult conversation, think of how you'd feel on the other end. The trick, however, is to *truly* set aside your own sentiments and think about it from their perspective. Saying that "I'd appreciate the

stern approach” or “I wouldn’t want someone to sugar coat their feedback,” isn’t an excuse to treat someone disrespectfully.

A stern approach doesn’t have to be a rude approach. Think about how your words and actions are likely to be received. You can’t read someone else’s mind or predict their reaction, but a little empathy can have miraculous results.

It’s not what you say but how you say it.

You could also say “it’s not what you do, but how, and perhaps where, you do it.” A difficult conversation, at work or outside of it, doesn’t have to be a bad one. Approaching a situation with anger is a guaranteed way to shut a conversation down. However, approaching it from a place of caring and curiosity can make a huge difference.

For example, if a coworker makes a comment in a meeting that you found disrespectful, it may feel cathartic to call them out there on the spot. However, if your goal is truly to maintain a good working relationship with that person, then you’re probably better off pulling them aside in private to address it. This makes them feel less attacked and gives you more time to cool off and think the situation through.

When addressing them, try not to accuse them. Remember, your perception of an event is a powerful angle to approach from. Instead of telling them their comment was rude and dismissive, tell them it *felt dismissive to you*. They’re much more likely to empathize this way than they would if you took a combative approach from the start.

Ultimately, treating people with respect and dignity, even if you don’t feel like they’re doing the same. After all, people who care about and respect each other are willing to go further to meet in the middle and help one another. This makes for a better work experience for everyone.

Change your perspective on difficult conversations at work

Changing the way you look at something can change how you feel about it. Difficult conversations at work can be intimidating, but you don’t have to dread them. Instead, look at them as an opportunity to help someone overcome a challenge. After all, an underperforming employee isn’t a disappointment, they’re an opportunity to make your next superstar. If your goal is truly to help the other person, then a difficult conversation is a great opportunity to do so.

How you approach the conversation will show on the other end. When someone knows you’re trying to help them and have their best interest in mind, they’ll be a lot more open to feedback and criticism.

Feelings aren’t right or wrong, they are valid.

People rarely view themselves as the “bad guy” in a situation. What may seem as antagonistic behavior to you, probably seems valid and justified to them. That’s why it’s necessary to understand where the other party is coming from. It doesn’t mean that you agree with them, it simply means that you acknowledge their feelings and experience.

This is a great place to start a conversation from. Validating their feelings doesn’t mean you agree with their actions. Try to empathize and tell them that you understand how they feel and how the situation may be difficult. However, also explain that their approach to addressing it was still a problem and needs to be addressed.

Additional Resource: Need more insights? Try using this [6-step workplace conflict resolution process](#).