

How to have difficult conversations at work



In psychologically safe workplaces, workers can speak up, ask questions, share opinions and make mistakes without fear of retaliation or other negative consequences. This can only happen when workers are able to have difficult conversations with employers and with each other.

Difficult conversations often arise when a worker has performance issues or is in conflict with their coworkers. They can also happen when a worker has been offended, bullied or harassed.

No one likes to have difficult conversations. At the same time, these conversations are crucial for building trust, proactively resolving conflicts and promoting a culture of openness and respect in the workplace.

This document provides information on why difficult conversations are important and offers tips to help make these conversations easier.

Why difficult conversations matter

Difficult conversations play a vital role in maintaining psychologically safe workplaces. They can help:

- **Solve problems:** Difficult conversations provide an opportunity to address unresolved concerns and conflicts.
- **Improve team dynamics:** Open communication, including difficult conversations, can reduce tension among workers.
- **Prevent escalation:** Addressing issues quickly and directly prevents resentment and disengagement from escalating into disrespectful behaviour, harassment or violence.
- **Build trust, respect and inclusivity:** Creating a space for difficult conversations shows a commitment to transparency, honesty and integrity while ensuring diverse views are heard.
- **Foster creativity:** When workers are encouraged to engage in open and honest discussions, they feel more comfortable sharing ideas, expressing concerns and challenging the status quo. An environment of constructive debate and feedback enables workplaces to explore all options and find the best solutions to problems.

Strategies for navigating difficult conversations

Prepare and plan

- Clarify your objectives.
- Gather relevant information.
- Consider the perspectives of all parties involved.
- Anticipate potential challenges and develop strategies to address them.

Choose the right time and place

- Select a suitable time and place for an open, distraction-free conversation.
- Ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Engage effectively

- **Use active listening:** Pay attention to verbal and nonverbal cues, empathize with the other person's perspective and ask clarifying questions. Show genuine interest and respect for their feelings and viewpoints.
- **Focus on solutions:** Frame the conversation around collaborative problem-solving rather than assigning blame or shifting responsibilities. Focus on practical steps to resolve the issue.
- **Manage emotions effectively:** Acknowledge and validate emotions like disappointment or anger. Keep the conversation focused on improving the situation.
- **Be mindful:** Don't rush conversations. Use techniques like deep breathing, self-reflection and mindfulness to stay calm and composed.
- **Seek common ground:** Find shared goals or values to build rapport and establish a foundation for mutually beneficial solutions.

Follow up

- Follow up with the other person after the conversation.
- Continue to communicate openly and transparently.
- Be willing to revisit the conversation as needed to address any remaining issues.
- Practice self-care.

Supporting difficult conversations in the workplace

Avoiding difficult conversations rarely helps. To maintain psychological safety, it's important to establish a work culture that promotes respectful and direct engagement with sensitive topics and challenging issues.

Unions and health and safety representatives should work with employers to set clear guidelines for difficult conversations in the workplace. Employers should acknowledge the stress difficult conversations may cause and ensure conversations are constructive, not harmful.

Employers should also offer hands-on workshops to develop conflict management skills and help set expectations around difficult conversations in the workplace. These workshops should ensure employers and supervisors gain the skills to manage conflicts positively. Workers should learn work expectations and have opportunities to practice handling difficult conversations and speaking up for themselves.

When difficult conversations occur, locals should ensure that all employer interactions with workers remain constructive and respectful.

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