

Difficult Conversations

Introduction:

Last month, the Employee Assistance Office shared our advice on intentionally building a trauma-informed workplace. However, being trauma-informed does NOT mean that you need to excuse inappropriate or unhealthy workplace behavior. This month, the EAO offers our tips to effectively handle tough conversations in the workplace. While it can seem difficult or awkward, managers who approach tough conversations with intention, vulnerability, and curiosity can successfully address workplace issues.

Before the meeting: Know your purpose and check your intentions

To prepare yourself, be clear on your purpose and what you would like to get out of the conversation. Consider the potential impact to yourself, the other person in the conversation, and the working relationship that you share. Then, check and possibly realign your intentions. You may have a professional intention of addressing a behavior or resolving a dispute, and a hidden intention of being “right,” avoiding discomfort, demonstrating superiority, or fixing the other person. Keeping this in mind will help you stay focused and set appropriate boundaries during your conversation. Start by owning your part in both the problem and the solution. Work on yourself first and settle your stress response by practicing a breathing exercise before the conversation. Think about what has and hasn’t worked in the past. You may also want to reflect on the common ground you share with the other person in this conversation. When you’re at odds with someone else, it can be challenging to feel like you share anything. Think to yourself: do we have mutual purpose and respect? Identify your common ground to approach your coworker with compassion.

You don’t need to memorize everything that you plan to say, but it can be helpful to think about your main points in advance. Write them out ahead of time to feel more prepared.

During the conversation: Speak for yourself and directly to the other person

When you speak with employees, be sure to speak only for yourself. Use “I” statements – for example: “Earlier when X happened, I noticed Y, and I wanted to check in”. Clear, direct observations about what you are sensing or noticing are best. Don’t fall into the trap of telling a story about why someone might have done or said something – you may be missing a crucial piece of context and be seen as accusatory.

Avoid situations where you triangulate (talk with a coworker about a third person) or spread gossip. Indirect communication can happen when trust is not yet built or has been damaged in the relationship. Having healthy boundaries and resisting the urge to gossip can build trust between coworkers. Be clear that it’s not appropriate to talk about people behind their backs or share unsubstantiated stories.

During the conversation: Explore all perspectives

Ideally, this conversation will help you understand someone else’s perspective, without determining if it’s right or wrong. Avoid dismissing your coworkers or listening primarily to respond. Instead, listen to understand their point of view. Stay sincere and curious about your coworker’s experience.

Acknowledge their feelings so they feel accepted and heard, and verbally agree when you share views to establish common ground. When your views differ, compare what you’re feeling with what they’ve said

instead of outright disagreeing or telling them they're wrong. Even when you disagree, it can be valuable to restate what you're hearing from your coworker to make it clear that you understand what they're saying.

During the conversation: Remain humble

It's crucial to express vulnerability and humility during tough conversations. Slow down and don't jump to conclusions. Your observations are valid, but they could overlook things or be misinterpreting a key part of the story. Don't disguise your opinions as fact. Allowing for more than one view of the truth will keep the conversation going to explore alternatives to problem solving.

While you're having a discussion with your coworker, use tentative language to describe what you're noticing and experiencing. This language indicates that you don't have all the answers- and that's okay! Don't be afraid to seem unsure, as this vulnerability can build trust and will make your coworker feel safe in sharing their own perspective.

If you're not sure on how to handle a situation, consult with a counselor at the Employee Assistance Office. We are here to provide an objective perspective, help you process your emotions, and explore next steps.

During the Conversation: Be conscious of your response

Be mindful of your own emotions and how they might impact the conversation. You communicate with more than just your words. Research shows that your conversation partner will be impacted 7% by the words you use, 38% by the volume and tone with which you speak, and 55% by nonverbal cues like facial expressions, gestures, and posture.¹ Emotion can be a useful way to connect with your coworker across differences, and you should strive to convey your compassion and open-mindedness both verbally and non-verbally.

If you feel that this conversation is turning into unproductive venting or escalating past what you're comfortable with, it is okay to pause the conversation to support or clarify a boundary. For example, you could say, "(Name), if I can just jump in for a moment. I can tell this is really important to you and I'm sorry for this frustration. I want to help you and in order to do that..." and redirect them to the more appropriate time, place, or resource.

After the Conversation: Taking action

The best outcome for your conversation is that your coworker feels accepted and heard AND that you have a plan for action going forward. Clearly end your conversation by restating the next steps you determine during your conversation. This tactic keeps everyone on the same page and gives you both the forward momentum you need to improve your relationship in the future.

Consider that this conversation may be the first of many, and that some solutions may require some creativity and problem solving. Solutions can also exist on a continuum, and you may need to work together to come to an answer that addresses your and your coworkers' concerns.

¹ <http://www.nonverbalgroup.com/2011/08/how-much-of-communication-is-really-nonverbal>

How can the EAO help?

The Employee Assistance Office is here to help you navigate difficult conversations. We offer one-on-one counseling for both personal and work-related concerns. Counselors provide a valuable perspective to challenging interpersonal situations and can help you clarify your goals before you speak with a coworker.

In some situations, two employees will work with EAO counselors for facilitated conversations. Facilitated conversations are informal processes where a neutral third party collects information and uses it to help structure a conversation between two parties who want to talk about their issues and create a shared understanding for moving forward.

Facilitated conversations are voluntary. Both employees need to choose to participate alongside an EAO counselor. The results of these conversations cannot be used for performance management or be included in an employee's formal record. Before we offer facilitated conversations, our counselors will assess whether it is appropriate by meeting individually with a supervisor or HR representative ahead of time.

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