

# Having Difficult Conversations



## Introduction

Having a difficult conversation is something many of us would prefer to avoid. No one likes conflict. But left to fester, a problem can snowball, and then that difficult conversation you've been putting off suddenly becomes more daunting and a lot more necessary.

Below we set out some useful tips to get your conversation started...

## Be prepared

- Get the information you need. Clarify the facts and understand the issues.
- Get a plan. Note the points you want to raise, work out realistic goals and list the questions you wish to ask.
- Decide upon a suitable time and private venue; and give the employee sufficient notice.
- Decide upon formality. *Informal* is the recommended first step. (Formal is generally for matters "in procedure" and would usually involve HR and union representation)

## Your approach to the meeting

- Welcome and thank the employee for giving up their time. Shake hands to keep things friendly.
- Avoid sitting behind a desk opposite the employee. Use a coffee table or seat both of you on the same side of the desk.
- Use open body language
- Be attentive
- Reassure the employee that the meeting is confidential.

## The discussion

- Explain sensitively and professionally the purpose of the meeting
- Focus on the issue, not the individual. Give examples.
- Explain the concern and how it affects students, pupils or colleagues etc..
- Ask open questions.
- Seek clarification if you don't understand the answer.
- Remain inclusive. Share responsibility for the issue and avoid blaming the employee.

- Avoid negative statements. Remain impartial and try not to judge.
- Avoid “you” statements e.g. *you are not getting the results I want*. Instead use inclusive statements e.g. *I am asking all members of the team how we can help them reach their goals*.
- Summarise what the employee tells you to show you are listening.
- Look for a win-win outcome. Encourage the employee to offer a solution...
- But be prepared for bad reactions. Adjourn until another day if necessary.

### **Coming to a solution**

- If a suitable outcome is possible, focus the conversation on making it a reality.
- Offer your encouragement and help in achieving the outcome.
- Agree a timescale if appropriate, or a further meeting to review progress.
- Explain you will document the discussion and/or note what has been agreed, and let the employee have a copy.

### **If a solution is not found**

- Don't give up. Recognise what the meeting has been able to achieve and agree to discuss the issue again, very soon.
- If a further meeting brings no solution consider moving to a formal procedure.

