How to address sensitive topics at work



Managers are often reluctant to address performance, sensitive personal issues or behavioural problems with employees due to anxieties about overly emotional reactions, making the situation worse, and the manager's own discomfort. But from a productivity standpoint, the sooner a problem is confronted, the sooner it can be resolved. Therefore, learning how to effectively handle difficult conversations is an important skill for any manager.

Be prepared

The first step to addressing a sensitive topic at work is to have the relevant facts and information at your fingertips. Connect with your HR representative to ensure you fully understand company policies and procedures, your rights and the employee's rights.

Here are some helpful tips to help you prepare:

- **Deciding on a location.** You need to be able to have an open, frank, one-to-one conversation in private without interruptions. Make sure the conversation is in-person, NOT by telephone or email.
- **Allocate enough time.** You don't want to appear rushed. Give yourself and your employee some breathing space after the meeting to refocus.
- **Contacting your Employee and Family Assistance Program.** Dealing with sensitive employee and workplace situations can challenge you as a people leader. Let your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) help with confidential and professional guidance for any situation you may be faced with.
- **Planning your conversation**. Jot down notes and key points to help you cover all relevant points and remain focussed.

The conversation

The goal of your conversation is for you and the employee to agree on a plan of action to help address the problem. It gives you the chance to fully understand what might be going on and gives the employee the chance to seek support or voice concerns. However, if the employee is resistant or defensive, your internal policies and procedures for handling discipline matters and grievances will provide you with a framework for any action you intend to take.

During the conversation be sure to:

- **Remain calm and focussed**. Concentrate on the issue or behaviour and not the person and remain objective and non-judgemental.
- **Be positive**. If this is the first time you are bringing up the topic to an individual, try to be positive. State your concern and then explain that your feedback is meant to help them improve and succeed.
- **Practise active listening.**
    - Make eye contact and watch your body language. Lean toward the other person and avoid folding your arms as this signals that you are not listening.
    - Do not interrupt.
    - Ask questions to clarify the situation. Avoid closed yes-or-no questions that tend to shut down conversation. Instead, paraphrase what the employee has said. For example, "In other words, what you are saying is...".
    - Acknowledge the employee's perspective.
- **Manage the meeting**. This means *you* direct the conversation and decide if and when tactics are working. You also decide if an adjournment or break is needed.
- **Involve the employee**. Together, agree to a plan of action and schedule a follow up meeting.

Follow up

Even if the employee has been successful in changing his or her behaviour or improving performance, a follow up conversation is important. Tell the employee that you appreciate his or her efforts and ask if any further support from you is required. If the situation has not improved, you need to have a formal discussion with the employee regarding company policies and procedures and the consequences of his or her continued behaviour or poor performance.

No one looks forward to having a difficult conversation with someone who works for them, but if the discussion is handled in the right way, it can not only lead to better performance or relationships for the employee, but for your whole team.