

Challenging conversations and how to manage them

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Challenging conversations and how to manage them

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About this guide

For many people challenging or difficult conversations are a bit like the common cold: we all get them, they can be a real nuisance, but there seems to be no cure.

Unlike the common cold, these conversations should not be avoided. The ability to be able to talk about very sensitive and emotive issues is an integral part of effective line management and can be critical to managing performance, promoting attendance and improving team dynamics.

The good news is that there are some very practical steps you can take to help you handle these conversations better and, where possible, get the right outcome for you, the employee and the organisation.

The key to mastering one-to-one interactions at work – particularly around performance, conduct or communication issues – is control. This guide will help you to stay in control of:

- the **situation**, by putting clear boundaries in place
- your **emotions**, by giving you the confidence to face whatever problem comes your way
- the **action** you plan to take.

Many line managers go into difficult conversations with very good intentions but often make the mistake of prolonging or intensifying the problem rather than restricting or resolving it.

Knowing when to expand a conversation – by seeking clarification and gaining understanding – and when to restrict it – in terms of deciding what happens next – can often only be learned through experience. Acas runs training events on 'Handling difficult conversations' which allow you to test your skills in a safe, supportive environment. To find out more visit www.acas.org.uk/training.

This guide has been written for line managers. The practical advice given is equally relevant to managers in small or large organisations.

Face the problem

Am I the right person?

When you arrive on Monday morning you learn that one of your team:

- has been posting derogatory comments about you and a colleague on a social networking site
- has suffered a significant dip in performance
- is returning from two weeks' sickness absence due to stress
- has failed to get the expected promotion
- is waiting at your door to complain about a colleague making sexist comments in the canteen.

What is a difficult conversation?

It is a conversation where you have to manage emotions and information in a sensitive way to:

- Address poor performance or conduct
- Deal with personal problems
- Investigate complaints/ deal with grievances
- Comfort or reassure someone – for example, if they are to be made redundant
- Tackle personality clashes.

The conversation usually takes place one-to-one.

The first thing you might ask yourself is: is this my problem?

Most problems to do with performance, conduct, absence or personal issues are the responsibility of the line manager. This is not always the case and there will be times when a more senior manager or, in larger organisations, Human Resource specialists, will talk to an employee first.

Some of the issues listed above may be dealt with as part of a formal internal process – for example, for dealing with grievances, performance or absence.

If you accept that you are the person to talk to an employee, there is still an understandable temptation to delay the potentially awkward encounter for as long as possible.

The 'now or never' moment

Most of us instinctively know when it is the right moment to deal with a problem. Issues do crop up without warning, but more often than not there are warning signs. You can help make conversations with your employees less difficult by:

- having a **quiet word** at the first sign that something is wrong. For example, you may notice that an employee becomes more moody and withdrawn or is acting out of character (see the Acas guide 'Promoting positive mental health at work' for more guidance on handling mental health issues)
- **keeping in touch** with your staff and the team. If they see that you are approachable and ready to listen, they are more likely to come to you at an early stage, when you might be able to act decisively to help
- **using employee representatives** as sounding boards for how staff are feeling about issues. For example, there may be unhappiness about the way change is being managed within the organisation.

If you **do not** act now then you could:

- mislead the employee by giving the impression that there is no problem
- deny the employee the chance to improve or put things right
- damage the productivity and efficiency of your business
- lower the morale amongst team members.

It is far better to nip problems in the bud, wherever possible, rather than waiting for them to become more entrenched or complicated.

Scenario 1: “It’s getting out of control”

What’s the problem?

You manage a small sales team. One of your staff, Mike, has developed poor timekeeping over the last few weeks, regularly arriving late and taking long lunch breaks. He is a good worker and you get on well with him so the conversation is going to feel a bit awkward.

What do you do?

You ask him to come in to your office. You start by asking how he is and if there are any problems he wishes to discuss. He says “no, everything is fine”. You say that his timekeeping is a concern to you and the rest of the team. You have kept a record of the times he has arrived late and the long lunch breaks and worked out how many hours each week he has been down on the hours he is supposed to work.

What’s the outcome?

Mike does not respond well to your comments. He does not accept that your report of his timekeeping is accurate and says that his hours are no worse than many of the team, so why are you singling him out?

As he leaves the room, quite upset, he tells you his wife has been very unwell. He says that he is not happy with the way he has been treated.

A few days later you try and speak to Mike again but he says he will only meet you if accompanied by the union rep and that he is considering taking out a grievance against you.

Learning points

Many managers have been in this position, where one problem suddenly snowballs and takes on a life of its own. You start off with the intention of dealing with the problem to nip it in the bud but end up worrying about your own conduct as a manager.

- Did you speak to Mike as soon as you noticed problems with his timekeeping?
- Did you notice any change in Mike’s behaviour or mood? If his wife is unwell he may have been stressed and needed extra support.

- Did you plan what you were going to say or how he might react?
- Did you tell Mike that you would be keeping a record of his timekeeping?
- Did you think about the outcome you wanted?
- Did you focus on the issue and not the person?

You also did some things well – for example, you asked an open question about his general welfare at the beginning and produced detailed evidence to back up what you were saying.

It's difficult, but why?

Talking face to face with an employee about issues or problems you both feel strongly about will take many managers out of their comfort zone. You may be worried that the meeting will turn into a confrontation or that it will not go as planned.

This sense of anxiety is a very natural response to a challenging situation and may be caused by feeling that you are not in complete control of:

- **The facts.** What happened, when and why? It will not be enough to breeze into a meeting confident that you 'get the gist' of what has been going on.
- **Your emotions.** You are expected to be in charge, aren't you? So what happens if emotions run high and you become embroiled in a heated exchange of views?
- **Your employee's emotions.** You may have prepared well for the interview and even have a rough plan of what you will say, but you cannot always predict how the employee will respond. For example, they may throw accusations back at you, or break down in tears.
- **The level of support you will get.** If you haven't informed your line manager and/or HR what you plan to do and the line you are going to take, you may end up feeling isolated or undermined.

- **What happens next.** Ideally, you will agree a plan of action with the employee to help address the problem, whether it's to do with performance, attendance or a personal matter, but what happens if, as a result of the meeting, the employee raises a grievance against you?

Many managers feel that the nature of the encounter forces them to act out of character – perhaps appearing more strict and business-like than in normal, day-to-day interactions. They may also be concerned that they may not have the right skills to tackle the meeting and solve the problem, and that they may get ‘found out’ in some way (see p12 for more information on ‘using your skills’).

Prepare

To prepare for your conversation you need to:

- establish the **facts**
- **reflect** on what you know about the individual
- get **support**
- check your **policies**
- **plan** the meeting.

What do you know?

If you are dealing with a performance or conduct issue, for example, you need to have the relevant facts at your fingertips. What were the employee's performance targets and in what way have they failed to meet these targets? Are there any extenuating circumstances – for example, if they have been on sickness absence or training courses do you need to adjust the targets?

If there is an attendance issue, as in Scenario 1 (see p5), make sure you have an accurate record of the employee's timekeeping. If you made a note of them coming in late on several occasions but didn't say anything, why not?

Ideally, if you have been giving regular feedback, there should not be any surprises in store for the employee at the meeting.

Of course, there are exceptions. If you need to talk to an employee about a sensitive personal matter, such as personal hygiene, they may

Plan the meeting in advance:

Decide on a location

- you need to be able to have an open, frank one-to-one conversation in private
- face to face is more effective than telephone or email, as the employee can see the matter is being taken seriously

Room layout

- sitting opposite someone with a table in front shows formality
- sitting next to someone can be less threatening

Allow sufficient time:

- don't rush
- allow time for a break to gather your thoughts or obtain more information
- give yourself some breathing space after the meeting, as you could be emotionally drained.

be shocked. You should consider what impact the issue is having on the team and be able to back up any statements you make with evidence and not hearsay.

It may also be worth thinking about what you know about the individual. Having a close working relationship can sometimes make it harder to broach sensitive subjects, as personal feelings may get in the way.

However, having a good rapport with an employee does mean that you will probably have some insight into their psychological make-up. This will help you anticipate how they will react. A pre-prepared script can help you keep on track and in control of the meeting. It's a bit like planning a few moves ahead in a game of chess.

Check your policies and procedures

Your internal policies and procedures – for handling discipline and grievances, for example, or absence – should give you a framework for any action you intend to take.

Where are the policies kept and have you read them recently? You don't want to get caught out. If your business has a 'trigger point' for a discussion about sickness absence then you need to be sure what that is. Similarly, you might need to check the official policy for flexible working, dress code, or use of social media at work – depending on the nature of the problem.

If you are satisfied that there has been a breach of company policy, and you have all the evidence you need, then you need to:

- decide how seriously to take the conversation
- get management support.

You may just want to remind the employee of the company policy and warn them about future conduct or you may have already had a quiet word and want to take a firmer stance.

Acas guides and training events can help you develop and implement policies for:

- discipline and grievances
- managing attendance
- health and wellbeing
- social networking
- managing conflict
- managing performance

Visit www.acas.org.uk/publications and www.acas.org.uk/training

Think about what you would like the outcome of the meeting to be. Is it an improvement in performance or perhaps a change in behaviour?

Scenario 2: Contain the problem and look to the future

You are a new manager. There has been a long, complex set of problems with one of your team. Sarah has a history of making rash, often inappropriate email accusations against managers, often at senior level. However, she may also have had some legitimate grievances against the way she perceived she was treated in the past.

A recent email from her to the Director, complaining about company policy, threatens to start off another episode. Her behaviour has alienated her from the rest of the team and relations with colleagues are strained. You arrange to have a meeting with her.

What do you do?

You begin by stating that although you are aware of issues in the past you are not going to discuss these, but focus solely on the future and how problems will be dealt with.

You remind her of the company email policy and remind her of the standard of behaviour you expect in the future and the process for raising grievances or concerns.

You ask her if she has any questions.

What's the outcome?

She tries to go back over old ground and raise previous issues but you remain firm and get her to agree to abide by the policies you have outlined.

A few days later, you hear from your line manager. Sarah has approached her to complain about something but because you briefed her on the line you were taking, Sarah was referred back to you.

Learning points

You decided to make a fresh start with this employee and concentrate on future conduct and behaviour which makes sense. You clearly planned what you were going to say in advance and remained in control of the meeting.

One issue that was not addressed is Sarah's relationship with the other members of the team. Some training might help her to reflect on how she comes across to others and to moderate the way she reacts to stressful situations.

Some employees exhibit behavioural traits – such as attention seeking or confrontational behaviour – that can be very challenging for line managers. These employees often respond best to very clear boundaries being put in place to manage the problem.

Remember your skills

Many of the skills needed to manage difficult conversations and behaviour are often referred to, in a rather derogatory tone, as 'soft'. But there's nothing soft about dealing with an emotional or confrontational employee who may appear to be trying to unsettle or undermine you.

Most managers will be familiar with the theory that underpins good communication – for example, the importance of active listening and questioning techniques – but many of these skills can only really be learnt through experience. Testing yourself in roleplaying can be a useful way of practising your skills (see Acas training events on this subject, go to www.acas.org.uk/training).

To manage a difficult conversation you need to think carefully about:

- the way you communicate
- your ability to take control of a meeting and
- your levels of self-belief.

Communicating

Questioning skills

The ability to use an appropriate type of question and get a useful response is the hallmark of an effective questioner. Development of this skill requires time and practice. It is worth being familiar with the following types of question:

Type of question	Example	Benefits	Drawbacks
Open question	<p>Why did you leave?</p> <p>To what extent would you say?</p> <p>How do you feel about?</p> <p>Open questions normally start with who, where, what, why, when or how.</p>	<p>These encourage the other person to talk freely, as little or no restriction is placed on their answer. They enable people to 'open up' on any topic, opinions or feelings.</p>	<p>The person may talk too much, drift away from the subject you have in mind and start to control the interview. To avoid this, try using a qualifier. For example, 'Very briefly, tell me how you..' or 'In a few words...'</p>
Closed questions	<p>What time did it happen?</p> <p>How long did it take?</p> <p>Did you speak first?</p>	<p>These questions can be effective in verifying specific information, re-focusing on the subject in hand or emphasising a vital point.</p>	<p>They can be very unhelpful when dealing with feelings. For example, 'Did that make you feel bad?' may not illicit the depth of response you were hoping for.</p>
Probing/reflective questions	<p>Why did you say that?</p> <p>What, in particular, made you feel like that?</p> <p>Are you telling me that?</p>	<p>Useful in seeking depth and detail.</p>	<p>The employee may feel threatened. Attention must be given to anticipating and monitoring the effect on the person.</p>
Leading questions	<p>You're not suggesting that ...?</p> <p>You must admit that ...?</p>	<p>These questions should be avoided.</p>	<p>You may run the risk of putting words in someone's mouth and leading them towards your own conclusions.</p>

Type of question	Example	Benefits	Drawbacks
Multiple questions	Can you tell me what happened, how you felt and what you did about it?	These questions should be avoided.	The person is unsure what part of the question to answer first and confusion can arise.
<p>Deciding which questioning technique to use and when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • at the start of the discussion it is usually best to ask open questions • you might then follow up with probing questions, with information verified using closed questions where necessary. 			

What does active listening involve?

When we listen to others we interpret the message they are giving to us through a combination of:

- words
- tone of voice
- facial expressions and body language.

Skilled communicators use non-verbal behaviour to back up and enhance what they are saying.

Active listening is a vital part of oral communication. It strengthens your relationship with the employee by demonstrating that you think they have something worthwhile to say.

On average we spend our working day communicating in the following ways:

- writing 9%
- reading 16%
- speaking 30%
- listening 45%

Active listening involves picking up the more subtle signals being given to us, as well the words.

Facial expressions can be the hardest to control and often betray our real emotions.

Dos and Don'ts of effective listening

DO:	DON'T:
✓ Use supportive and encouraging gestures, such as nods of the head and smiles	X Modify the message you hear to suit your own view
✓ Make eye contact: look at the speaker directly without staring	X Be pre-occupied with your own problems
✓ Take notes: jot down key words and use these for later questions	X Make up your mind too quickly without hearing the whole story
✓ Look interested by facing the speaker, altering your facial expression and staying relaxed and calm	X Become anxious about what you are hearing and over-react
✓ Ask questions – but try to avoid interrupting.	X Be prejudicial and listen with a closed mind.

Staying in control

The key to managing difficult conversations is control. You need to control the meeting and how it progresses. This means you decide if and when you need to adjourn for a break and what tactics are working and if you need to change your approach.

For example, you may have started out being quite expansive and friendly but realise that a firmer style is needed to bring the meeting to a conclusion and agree a way forward – see p19 for the steps to take.

Although it can be tempting to enter a meeting wanting to be liked and to maintain a close friendship with the employee, most conversations will work best if you adopt a professional manner. Set out from the beginning how the meeting will run, the issues you wish to discuss and how you hope to move forward.

It can be difficult to control your emotions if the employee becomes confrontational or makes an accusation about you. They may seek to get behind your defences by appealing to you personally and hoping you will identify with their point of view or concerns. Remember to focus on the behaviour and not the person and to remain objective and non-judgemental at all times.

Being in control is not about finding winners and losers. Be prepared to negotiate, particularly if the employee is acknowledging the problem, ready to reach a compromise or is working to agree a way forward.

How much do you believe in yourself?

Can you honestly say:

- I have the skills needed to deal with the difficult conversation
- I will hold my nerve and focus on the issues even if I am provoked
- I will not worry about the encounter at home
- I believe I will be fair to the employee
- I have the stamina to manage the issue even if it goes on for months
- What I am doing is right – for the employee, for me and for the business
- I have all the support I need if I begin to doubt myself or the course of action I am taking

If the answer to any of these questions is 'no', it may help to get some training. See Acas training events on 'Handling difficult conversations' at www.acas.org.uk/training

Scenario 3: Thinking on the spot

One of the people you manage, Jim, is usually a very good worker, but in the last few weeks his performance has dipped and he has been unusually prickly and uncommunicative. You have tried to have a quiet word, to find out if anything is the matter but have been stonewalled.

You arrange to see Jim to address his recent unsatisfactory performance and negative attitude towards recent team projects.

What do you do?

You state the purpose of the meeting and how it will be structured. You start by saying that Jim's standard of work is normally good and you are concerned by the recent dip. You also mention his moody behaviour and open up the discussion by asking if there is 'anything you would like to mention in way of explanation?'

What's the outcome?

Jim is pretty quiet at first but after more probing, he says that he has been diagnosed with depression and would like this to be taken into account when assessing his performance.

Jim does not want to discuss the causes of his depression but says that although it is 'not work-related' he is finding it harder to get motivated and the medication he has been given is making him feel tired. He is aware that he is being a little withdrawn and will do his best to be more professional.

You ask him if he wants the team to know anything and he says that, at the moment, he would rather it remained confidential. You adjourn the meeting and agree to meet again in a couple of days. You ask Jim to think of anything he or the team can do to help and you will look at ways of supporting him through his illness.

Learning points

You handled the meeting well, staying objective and in control and giving Jim the chance to open up. It was also a good idea to adjourn once you learnt about Jim's mental health problem. It would have been

inappropriate to focus too much on his performance until you had both had time to think of ways of offering greater support.

If Jim's depression is classed as a disability – in other words, if it affects his ability to carry out his day-to-day activities – then you will have to consider making reasonable adjustments to help him stay in work. This might include offering flexible working or restructuring his job to reduce the amount of interaction required with team members.

Follow these steps

The following steps give you a useful framework for dealing with challenging conversations. Although all conversations about performance, conduct or personal issues are potentially challenging, the steps below are geared towards the more formal meetings.

If you are having a more informal chat with an employee and just want to sound them out about how they feel, you may wish to use the same basic structure but adopt a more conversational and relaxed approach. For example, it may be more appropriate when you start the meeting to put the employee at ease by asking lots of open questions rather than being overly procedural. This is a judgment call only you can make depending on the nature of the problem.

<p>Introduction – set the right tone</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin the conversation by explaining the purpose of the meeting • Set out the structure of the meeting • Agree standards of behaviour required during the meeting • Adopt a calm and professional manner • Reassure them about confidentiality – both prior to and after the meeting.
<p>CHECK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't be afraid of referring to your pre-prepared script, it will help you stay in control • Remember to focus on the issue and not the person.

<p>State what the issues are and give evidence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell them what the problem is using your knowledge of the situation • Give specific examples and refer to dates, documents, work or specific interactions • Explain the impact the problem is having on the individual, the team and the organisation.
<p>CHECK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If possible, you should have already spoken to the employee informally about the problem – surprises can be very hard to handle! • If you have been monitoring their behaviour or conduct, this should have been agreed with them earlier • If the meeting is just aimed at giving them a reminder about behaviour or conduct then stick to that – be clear about what you are doing.
<p>Ask for an explanation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to what they have to say – they may need to let off steam • Keep an open mind and don't jump to conclusions • Acknowledge their position and any mitigating circumstances • Introduce your questions and explore the issues together.
<p>CHECK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If new evidence emerges, adjourn the meeting if this feels appropriate • Remember that you are in control. Use your questioning techniques to avoid diversions or too much repetition • You may have to be firm and keep restating your position • Stay clear of emotive language and don't respond to manipulative behaviour.

<p>Agree a way forward</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask the employee for proposals to resolve the situation • Discuss the options • MAKE A DECISION – you are in charge! • Arrange a follow up meeting • Monitor and feedback on progress and continue to provide support where agreed.
<p>CHECK</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document any agreement and give a copy to the employee. This should set out: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • agreed outcomes with dates and standards required • any support or training to be provided by the manager • any consequences if the agreement is breached.

Information in this booklet has been revised up to the date of the last reprint – see date below. For more up-to-date information, check the Acas website www.acas.org.uk.

Legal information is provided for guidance only and should not be regarded as an authoritative statement of the law, which can only be made by reference to the particular circumstances which apply. It may, therefore, be wise to seek legal advice.

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