

Difficult conversations in the workplace - manager course

How to manage emotions

Understanding emotions

People behave the way they do for a reason. Generally we look for ways to belong, feel significant, and protect ourselves and our self-esteem. We have positive emotional responses when our needs are met, our expectations are fulfilled and our beliefs are confirmed. When they are not, we may display a range of negative emotions, including nervousness, anger, frustration, or fear.

Often a difficult conversation goes wrong because of the emotions involved – not because of who is right or wrong. As a manager, a critical role you can play is to manage not only your emotions but also those of your employee.

Manage your emotions

Approach the situation rationally and objectively. Being angry or defensive will rarely give you the outcome you want.

Think about what your body language is saying: does it signal that you are approachable, non-threatening and ready to talk and listen?

Use a low and calm tone of voice. Your tone of voice may say more than the actual words you use.

Don't be afraid to be empathetic during the conversation with your employee. If you find yourself getting worked up, it may help to take a deep breath or silently count to 10 before you speak.

Speak slowly and avoid using long complex sentences. Try to be clear and direct with your communication.

Consider your view of the employee – if you are angry with them or have a poor relationship with them, it may affect your ability to resolve the issue successfully. Focus on the issue not your feelings or the person involved.

Manage your employee's emotions

It's quite likely that you will face negative emotions during a difficult conversation. Employees are likely to feel nervous, defensive, sad, frustrated or afraid when having a difficult conversation.

Don't just focus on the content of the conversation – pay attention to the emotions as well. Listen to the words and the feelings.

Strategies for handling difficult emotions in employees include:

- showing genuine interest in what the employee has to say
- expressing support and reassurance, for example “I can see this is hard for you” or “It’s ok to be upset about this”
- remaining calm. If you are emotional and upset it will only make the employee more upset. Manage your own reaction (don’t become inflamed or defensive)
- apologise, if appropriate. For example “I am sorry but I cannot grant you your leave at such short notice”
- do not make a promise you cannot fulfil just to diffuse the employee’s emotional reaction
- reinforce the behaviour you want. For example, by saying: “I am really happy with the way you have taken this feedback on board” or “It is good that you are open to discussing this topic”
- show that you are taking account of their emotions and their needs, for example “So how do you feel about what we have discussed and decided on?”

Things to watch out for

- Reacting to demands or threats.
- Making accusations or laying blame, such as “You did...”, “You are...” or “You told me that...”. It’s best to avoid the use of the word ‘you’. Doing this keeps the conversation focused on the impact of the behaviour rather than blame.
- Relying on assumptions about what the employee has said or thinks. Check that your assumptions are valid and be prepared to adapt.