



Employee's guide to difficult conversations in the workplace

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Why should I have a difficult conversation?

What is a difficult conversation?

In the workplace, a difficult conversation is one in which you have to manage emotions and information in a sensitive way to deal with a workplace issue.

A difficult conversation may involve:

- topics you don't want to talk about
- situations where you're not sure what to say
- conflicting opinions
- circumstances where the outcome is uncertain
- discussions which make you feel uncomfortable.

At one time or another, you may face a difficult conversation at work - this is normal. For example, you may find it difficult to:

- ask your manager about your rights and entitlements, such as whether you are receiving the correct pay
- ask about changes to your hours or working arrangements
- request leave
- admit a mistake
- request help with a problem or raise a concern about something that is troubling you at work.

Why are difficult conversations important?

Difficult conversations are a normal part of life. The best way to handle a workplace issue is to actually deal with it.

Although difficult conversations can seem daunting, talking about issues when they come up will help you to:

- maintain a positive and open relationship with your manager
- understand and receive your full entitlements
- provide suggestions about how the issue can be resolved
- feel more confident in your work
- avoid stressful, costly and lengthy disputes later.

Some people avoid difficult conversations because it makes them feel uncomfortable, but most workplace problems will not go away by themselves.

If there is a problem at work, raise it promptly. Your manager may not even be aware that there is a problem. If there is something wrong, most managers would prefer to resolve it quickly so both of you can get on with the job.

Is a conversation the best way to solve the problem?

When a problem arises, decide whether speaking to your manager is the best approach.

In some cases you may decide not to raise the issue because the problem is trivial, or temporary.

In other cases, you may feel unable to speak with your manager, because of the seriousness of the issue or because you feel your manager is part of the problem (for example if you have been the subject of discrimination). In these circumstances it may be more appropriate to speak to a more senior manager, a Human Resources officer or the Fair Work Ombudsman.

How to prepare for a difficult conversation

Decide what you want to achieve

Before you have the conversation, ensure that you have a clear understanding of the problem that you want to resolve.

Ask yourself:

- why do you want to have the conversation?
- what's important to you?
- what do you want to achieve?
- is the outcome you're looking for realistic?

Check your facts and gather relevant documents

Learn as much as you can about the issue and try to establish the facts before approaching your manager.

If your issue relates to your minimum terms and conditions of employment, check your entitlements and rights first. For example, if you want to speak about taking parental leave, check whether you are eligible for it and how much leave is available before having the discussion. Ensure you check any relevant policies and procedures that may apply in your workplace. Information about minimum terms and conditions of employment can also be found at www.fairwork.gov.au.

Print copies of any documents you need to bring to the meeting, such as relevant clauses from your award or workplace agreement. You can access your award from www.fairwork.gov.au.

Know the right person to speak to

Make sure that you speak to the right person about the topic you are concerned about.

Generally, you should approach your supervisor or manager first. In some cases a more senior manager or a Human Resources Officer may be more appropriate. Check whether your business has a policy or procedure in place for raising workplace issues.

Consider whether you need support

If you're anxious about talking to your manager, it can be helpful to take someone else with you. If you decide to do this, make sure that you inform your manager beforehand. Your manager may also want to bring someone else to the discussion.

A support person can:

- give you emotional and practical support
- help you understand the issue
- take notes and remind you later of things that were said.

A support person should not:

- be directly involved in the problem
- be your advocate
- speak on your behalf.

Gain clarity

Try to detach yourself from the problem so that you can see the situation more clearly. Emotions and feelings can cloud your judgement. If possible, talk about the issue with someone who is not directly involved and can view the situation objectively. Avoid gossiping with your co-workers as this can make the problem worse.

Try to think about the situation from your manager's point of view and remember to keep an open mind about your situation. Even if you think you have all of your facts together, there may be something relevant to the situation you didn't know about. Your manager may also bring information to the conversation that you weren't aware of.

Prepare what you are going to say

Spend some time writing down the key points you want to cover. This will help you to explain the issue clearly to your manager.

- Write down what the problem is and why. Break the issues down into separate points.
- List examples against each point, and note any documents you have to show your manager (such as a copy of your award).
- Make a list of questions you have and any information you need from your manager.
- Write down possible solutions that you can propose to your manager to resolve the problem.

The template 'Your conversation plan' available at page 10 of this Guide can help you prepare.

Approach your manager to arrange the meeting

Arrange a convenient time and place to speak with your manager. It is best if you have the conversation face to face in a private location where you won't be rushed or interrupted.

Approach your manager in person to let them know you want to talk to about an issue that's been concerning you. Try to do this at a time when your manager is not busy.

How to handle a difficult conversation

Here is a summary of the steps you can follow to help you have a successful conversation:

Step 1 – State the problem

- State the problem and provide examples. State the impact that the problem is having on your work.

Step 2 – Listen and question

- Ask questions and listen to your manager. Try to understand their point of view.

Step 3 – Reassess your position

- After your manager has put forward their point of view, it is your turn to clarify your position.
- Be assertive, but not aggressive.
- Consider whether your position changed based on the information your manager provided.

Step 4 – Look for solutions

- Work with your manager to develop solutions.
- Agree on a way forward.

Step 5 – Close the conversation

- Clarify and document the agreed actions and next steps.
- Thank your manager.

Step 1 - State the problem

Begin the conversation by explaining the situation clearly and concisely. You should address:

- **what the issue is**
- **why it's important**
- **how it is affecting you at work.**

While it's important to explain the impact the problem is having on you, you should avoid laying blame or making accusations, as this is likely to get your manager offside. It helps if you use "I" statements instead of "you" statements – for example "I feel ..." rather than "you made me feel...".

Remember to stick to the facts, and provide examples where possible. Refer to any documents you have supporting your position, such as a copy of your award.

Step 2 - Listen and question

Once you've made a clear statement of the problem, start listening to what your manager has to say.

Focus on listening more and talking less. Even if you're convinced that you're 'right', the conversation will be more productive if you listen. Try to consider the issue from your manager's point of view.

Some hints and tips for good listening:

- face your manager and maintain eye contact
- ask questions to clarify anything you don't understand
- ask 'open' questions like "Can you help me understand what's happening?" or "What's your perspective on this?"
- acknowledge what your manager is saying and show you understand by nodding and repeating back what they've told you
- keep an open mind – wait until your manager is finished before deciding whether you agree or disagree with what they have said.

Step 3 – Reassess your position

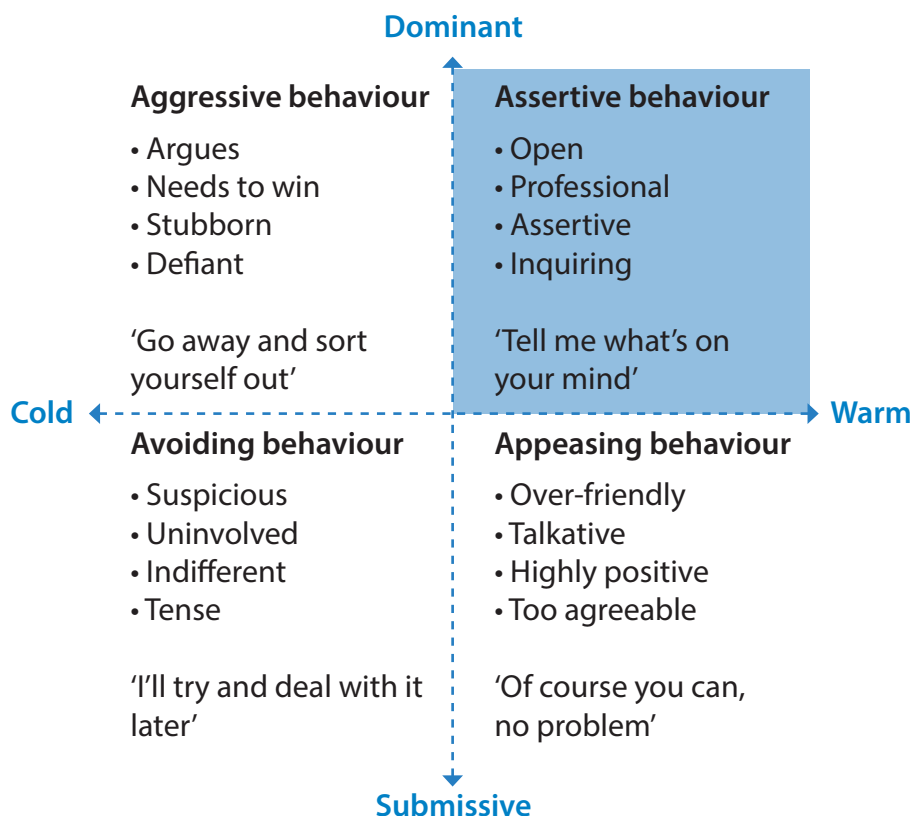
After your manager has put forward their point of view, clarify your position. Has your position changed based on the information they provided? Is there something your manager has missed or misunderstood?

It's important to remain assertive. Assertiveness is the mid-point between being passive (or too agreeable) and being aggressive.

Assertive people:

- feel free to express their feelings, thoughts, and desires
- state their opinions, while still being respectful of others
- control their anger and speak in a calm and rational manner
- are willing to compromise with others, rather than always wanting their own way.

This diagram highlights different behaviours that people can display during conversations. You are more likely to resolve a situation if your behaviour during a difficult conversation is in the blue "assertive behaviour" zone.



Step 4 - Look for solutions

Suggest ways to move forward to resolve the situation. Always come prepared with possible solutions. By presenting different ways to resolve the issue, you indicate to your manager that you are keen to resolve the matter and have carefully considered solutions.

Invite your manager to propose their own solution and be willing to consider different solutions. When you are open to searching for an alternative, your manager is often likely to do the same.

In some cases, your manager may need time to consider their response or check their own facts. In this case, allow your manager to do this and arrange a follow-up meeting.

Be prepared to accept that your manager may not admit fault or apologise, even if they are at fault. Try not to let this get you down. The purpose of the conversation was to resolve the issue and you're now well on the way to achieving this.

Step 5 - Close the conversation

When you have reached a solution or a way forward, you are ready to close the conversation.

Summarise the discussion and agree on action points and next steps:

- recap where you and your manager are at
- discuss what you both need to do to resolve the issue
- agree to a date for a follow-up meeting if required
- follow up in writing if need be.

Finally, thank your manager for being open and listening to you. Statements you can use to close a conversation include:

- "Thank you for taking the time to talk to me, I'm glad we could discuss this. I look forward to an update next week."
- "I appreciate your efforts with resolving this and look forward to hearing from you."
- "So to summarise ...and I will wait to hear from you by the end of next week."
- "Ok so I will work on And you will ... and we will have regular weekly catch up from now on. Thank you again."
- "Thanks for listening to my concerns today, I appreciate it."

Manage your emotions

How emotions make conversations difficult

Emotions are part of any difficult conversation.

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.

While it is important to keep emotions in check during workplace conversations it is equally important to acknowledge and respect each other's feelings. In fact ignoring feelings – yours or your manager's – is the most common mistake made in difficult conversations.

Instead of blaming others for our feelings, we need to become aware of them, take responsibility for them and take steps to manage our emotions.

Strategies to help you manage your emotions

Before the conversation:

- think about your preferred outcome and be honest with yourself about the intent of the conversation. Do you want to vent so you feel better or do you want to resolve the issue?
- tell your manager what you are concerned about and ask them to set aside some time for you to talk
- avoid emotional statements by using “I” instead of “you”. For example, “I would like to talk about this problem with you” rather than “There is a problem and you have to deal with it”
- write down what you see as the problem and why you believe it is a problem. This helps you to become aware of your feelings – often when we put something in writing it either looks reasonable or it doesn’t
- write down what you believe your manager’s position is. It helps to think about how they may approach the issue – try to put yourself in their shoes.

During the conversation:

- explain your side of the story without laying blame
- make your message clear, concise and to the point
- speak slowly, at an even tone and volume
- remain calm, in control and not defensive. Sometimes it helps to take a deep breath or silently count to 10 before you speak. Remember, being angry or defensive is unlikely to resolve the issue
- focus on the issue, not the person involved
- express your own feelings in a non-confrontational way. Use “I” statements instead of “you” statements - e.g. “I feel ...” rather than “you made me feel...”
- avoid making assumptions about your manager’s intentions.

Expect that your manager might be surprised or upset by what you have said – remember they have not had as much time to think about the issue as you. If your manager does respond emotionally, try to acknowledge their feelings without becoming emotional yourself.

After the conversation

Document the conversation

After the conversation:

- document the discussion you had
- write down any agreements that were reached
- include the date and time, and who was present at the meeting.

Keeping notes is important in case you need to refer back to what was said or agreed at a later date.

The template ‘Your conversation plan’ available at page 10 of this Guide can help you document the conversation.

Reflect

After the conversation, take some time to reflect on the conversation and your reactions. Learn from the experience and think about what you could do differently next time.

It might help to debrief with a support person or a family member. They may assist you to see the situation from a different perspective. Try to avoid talking to your colleagues about the conversation.

If you feel you may have overreacted during the conversation, allow yourself to cool down and then meet with your manager again.

Follow-up

It is important to make sure that you and your manager are clear about the issue moving forward. It's a good idea to confirm what you have agreed in writing.

Take the steps you agree to take. Your manager may need time to consider the issue you raised or check their facts. Allow them time to do this and follow-up if needed.

Even if the conversation didn't go as you had hoped, remain professional at work and keep communication lines open with your manager.

What if you can't resolve the problem?

If you haven't been able to reach an appropriate outcome, you can seek advice from:

- employee representatives within your workplace
- your union – if you are not a union member you can contact the Australian Council of Trade Unions at www.actu.org.au for information about union services and membership
- the Fair Work Ombudsman - www.fairwork.gov.au.

After you have left the workplace

Sometimes a problem can come up after you've left the workplace or there's a matter you need to chase up with your former employer. This might be because you think you weren't paid the right amount while you were working or didn't receive all of your entitlements after you finished.

The first step to resolving the issue is to speak to your former employer. Mistakes can happen and employers usually want to fix them quickly.

The principles are the same.

If you need to have a conversation with a former employer, you should approach the conversation using the same principles outlined in this course.

Practise the scenarios and review the guides supplied, then adapt the principles to your situation.

Prepare for the conversation

Follow the steps outlined in the guide: 'How to prepare for a difficult conversation' available at page 2 of this Guide.

Call or email your former employer in advance to agree on a mutually convenient time to have the conversation. This can either be face-to-face or over the phone.

Give your former employer an idea of what the conversation will be about and time to prepare for it. It doesn't help to put them 'on the spot' at a time when other concerns or people may be a distraction.

When speaking to your former employer, it's important to remember to remain polite even if you didn't leave your job on good terms. If you are contacting them by email, pay special attention to your tone and language. You should avoid saying anything that might prevent you from resolving the issue.

During the conversation

Follow the steps outlined in the guide: 'How to handle a difficult conversation' available at page 4 of this Guide.

If you are having the conversation by phone, remember that there are a lot of visual cues (like facial expressions or body language) that the other person won't see. Therefore it is helpful to keep a positive tone and use words to acknowledge what they are saying.

After the conversation:

Follow the steps outlined in the guide: 'After the conversation' available on page 7 of this Guide.

It is especially important that you document the conversation:

- write down the details of what was discussed
- write down any agreements that were reached
- include the date and time and who you spoke to.

This will give you a written record of events, and can be important if you need to take further action. It's a good idea to email or post your notes of the conversation to your former employer as a record for you both.

What if you can't reach a resolution?

Understand that your former employer might not be able to resolve the issue straight away. They might not have the authority to make a final decision, or they might need to check their facts, or speak with other people such as their payroll officer or their accountant first. Give your manager a reasonable amount of time to respond.

If you are not able to reach a fair outcome, you can make a complaint to the Fair Work Ombudsman. Information on the complaint process can be found at www.fairwork.gov.au.

Note: If you have any concerns about the circumstances around your termination (for example, if you think you were unfairly dismissed) you should contact the Fair Work Commission at www.fwc.gov.au. If you plan to make an application for unfair dismissal, unlawful termination or adverse action, please note that time limits apply.

Your conversation plan

This sheet will help you to prepare for your conversation, stay focused on the issues and arrive at a solution. Complete the first half before you meet and the second half during or shortly after your discussion.

Before the conversation

What are the issues you want to discuss?

Give examples:

What impact is the problem having on you or your work?

What information do you need from your manager?

What is your idea of a possible solution/s?

During/after the conversation

What was your manager's response to the issue or concern raised?

Has any new information come to light?

Are there any facts, issues or entitlements that need to be checked?

What solution/s did your manager suggest?

Describe the agreement you reached in the conversation

What are the next steps?

For you:

For your manager:

Date for a follow up meeting: _____