

Dignity at Work and Study Guidance Note

Dealing with Difficult Conversations

If someone has behaved inappropriately towards you, or you have witnessed such behaviour, the best action in the first instance is to take care of yourself and your own mental health before deciding what to do. How you deal with a situation will depend on a number of things, not least the severity of the behaviour that you have experienced or witnessed. For some issues it may be appropriate to deal with the matter informally. If you decide on an informal approach when, or if, you feel up to it, and only ever when you feel safe to do so, use open and constructive communication to try and sort the problem out. If you feel confident enough you can approach the person concerned and talk it through.

Speaking to someone directly about an issue regarding their behaviour or actions can be daunting. This guide sets out good practice and some hints and tips for conducting difficult conversations to help give you the confidence to deal with the matter. Staff who regularly have to conduct difficult conversations, or who feel they would benefit from more in-depth guidance in advance of their first difficult conversation, are encouraged to undertake the [Staff Development course *Dealing with Difficult Conversations*](#) in addition to reading this guide.

Timing

If you feel able to, it is best to deal with matters promptly (although not necessarily immediately). The problem will not usually resolve itself and the longer you leave it the more stressful it may become for you.

Preparation

Effective preparation, in advance of the conversation, will help you get across what you want to say without losing sight of the main issue. Think about the following when trying to frame what you want the other person to take away from the discussion:

- Sometimes getting started can be the hardest part – think about how to open the conversation. Decide on what it is you want to say, including the effect that the behaviour has had on you e.g. “I want to give you some feedback about something you said/did yesterday. You might not be aware but when you said/did it made me feel because.....”
- State the issues clearly to avoid any misunderstandings
- Give specific examples and back this up with dates or situations where the behaviour has been displayed
- Remember to focus on the issue rather than the person you are speaking to. Stick to the facts and avoid generalisations and comments on the individual’s personality.
- Avoid belittling the issue – don’t use phrases such as “it’s really not a big deal but” as it could result in the person not taking the issue seriously.
- Decide what you want out of the conversation, e.g. to make the person aware of your feelings, to get an apology, or get agreement that the behaviour will not be repeated
- Practising what you are going to say, preferably out loud, either by yourself or with a friend, will help to give you the confidence to deal with the issue.
- If you think you might forget the points you want to get across, try writing them down and taking them with you

The Conversation

Consider the best place to have the conversation. It should not be in the middle of an open plan office or communal area. However, if you are uncomfortable about having the chat in a private office/space think about bringing along a friend for support. Alternatively, you could have the conversation in a suitably quiet area where there are other people around, but where you won't get disturbed. You should also think about:

- Time - ensure that you allow sufficient time to have the discussion, rather than squeezing it in between lectures or meetings for either you or your colleague.
- Your frame of mind before you start the conversation. Difficult conversations will inevitably have emotion attached to them. Preparing in advance will help you to deal with your own emotions but will not eradicate them. It may also be helpful to gauge the how the other person is feeling prior to starting the conversation. If they are angry or upset about something else for example, they may be less receptive to what you have to say.
- Your body language – speak in a calm tone of voice at a moderate volume; try not to cross your arms.

Dealing with an emotional Response

Difficult conversations may become emotional. People may become defensive or deny your version of what happened. Don't ignore the other person's point of view but do acknowledge that you seem to have a difference of opinion. Ask them to indicate which aspects of your feedback that they find inaccurate or unfair.

People may get angry and if so, don't become defensive or engage in a shouting match. Acknowledge they are angry ask them to explain why.

Alternatively, people may be hurt or upset by what is being discussed. Acknowledge that what they are hearing may be difficult for them but the feedback is about a specific incident, rather than them as a person, and discussing it will help prevent the issue from happening again. If either of you become too upset it may be better to pause the conversation and arrange to meet at another time.

As a last resort, if you feel the conversation is getting out of control you can end it and remove yourself from the situation. Let the other person know that you don't believe the current discussion will resolve the issue and you will have to think of another way to approach the matter.

The Next Steps

If the conversation goes as planned, you will be able to agree the way forward together with the other party and the matter should get resolved.

If you are unable to resolve the matter you may need to proceed with another course of action. Further advice on who to talk to, or what action might be available to you, can be found in the Dignity at Work and Study Toolkit.