

DEAR F-WIT

GORDON'S GUIDE TO DIFFICULT WORKPLACE CONVERSATIONS

SAY WHAT NEEDS TO BE SAID

How to address problems clearly, respectfully
and before they become bigger problems.



WORKPLACE LESSONS NOBODY WAS BRAVE ENOUGH TO SAY

Avoiding it does not make it disappear

Most difficult conversations do not become difficult on the day they happen. They become difficult during the days, weeks or months in which they do not happen.

The problem is noticed. Nothing is said. It happens again. Frustration grows. Stories are created about motives and intentions.

By the time someone finally speaks, the conversation is carrying far more than the original issue.



GORDON SAYS

Avoiding the conversation does not protect the relationship. It leaves the problem in charge of it.

Why we avoid difficult conversations

Most people avoid these conversations because they care about what might happen.

- The person may become upset.
- The relationship could be damaged.
- The discussion may become confrontational.
- I may not express myself properly.
- They may disagree with my version.
- I may be accused of being unfair.
- I could make the situation worse.
- I may not have enough evidence.
- They may retaliate or complain.
- I may discover that I contributed.

While you wait, the behaviour may continue, resentment grows and the other person loses the opportunity to adjust.

GORDON SAYS

If it matters enough to complain about repeatedly, it probably matters enough to discuss directly.

Is a conversation actually needed?

CHECK 01

IMPACT

Has it affected performance, trust, safety, morale or someone else's work?

CHECK 02

PATTERN

Is this repeated behaviour or a meaningful single incident?

CHECK 03

EXPECTATION

Was the standard reasonable, clear and understood?

CHECK 04

ASSUMPTIONS

What did you observe, and what have you inferred?

CHECK 05

AUTHORITY

Are you the right person to address it?

CHECK 06

TIMING

Can it be raised promptly, privately and constructively?

A conversation is probably needed when the issue continues, the impact matters, others are affected or you keep discussing the person instead of speaking with them.

Should someone else be involved?

Not every concern should begin as an informal one-to-one conversation. Check your authority, policies and the level of risk before you proceed.

GREEN | USUALLY PROCEED

Minor misunderstandings, everyday expectation-setting, early informal feedback and routine relationship concerns within your authority.

AMBER | CHECK FIRST

Repeated or escalating behaviour, disputed facts, formal performance action, health or adjustment issues, conflicts of interest, confidentiality questions or matters outside your authority.

RED | STOP AND ESCALATE

Possible bullying, harassment, discrimination, threats, safety risks, serious misconduct, fraud, retaliation, protected disclosures, criminal conduct or an existing investigation.

FOR FORMAL OR SERIOUS MEETINGS

Tell the employee the purpose in advance, check whether a support person should be offered, follow workplace policies and document the meeting and outcome.

GORDON SAYS

Good judgement includes knowing who needs to be in the room.

Separate facts from stories

A major risk is presenting an interpretation as if it were a fact. Describe behaviour that can be discussed, not character that must be defended.

FACT

The report was submitted two days after the agreed deadline.

STORY

You do not care about deadlines.

FACT

You interrupted Priya three times while she was presenting.

STORY

You are disrespectful.

FACT

Your voice became louder and you said, 'This is a waste of time.'

STORY

You were trying to undermine me.

GORDON SAYS

Treat your interpretation as something to test - not something already proven.

Before you speak

01

WHAT HAPPENED?

Describe the specific behaviour without exaggeration.

02

WHAT WAS THE IMPACT?

Name what it affected and why that matters.

03

WHAT DON'T I KNOW?

Identify what you need to understand.

04

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Define the future behaviour or outcome.

05

WHAT AM I WILLING TO HEAR?

Make room for information that challenges your view.

06

HOW MAY I HAVE CONTRIBUTED?

Consider unclear expectations, mixed messages or delay.

Before arranging a formal or serious meeting, check whether HR, your manager or a support person should be involved.

Aim for clarity, understanding and an agreed way forward - not victory.

The CLEAR conversation framework

C

CHECK YOUR FACTS

Begin with what you directly observed.

L

LEAD WITH PURPOSE

Explain why the conversation matters.

E

EXPLAIN BEHAVIOUR AND IMPACT

Use: When [behaviour] happened, the impact was [consequence].

A

ASK AND LISTEN

Invite their perspective and listen to learn.

R

RESOLVE THE NEXT STEP

Agree on change, support, timing and review.

A difficult conversation, made clearer

THE SITUATION

Alex has repeatedly interrupted colleagues during team meetings. Other people have started contributing less.

AVOID 'You're dominating every meeting and making everyone uncomfortable.'

OBSERVATION In yesterday's meeting, you spoke over Mia twice and interrupted Daniel before he completed his update.

IMPACT We may miss important information, and some team members appear less willing to contribute.

CURIOSITY How did you see the meeting?

EXPECTATION I need you to allow people to complete their point before responding.

NEXT STEP Let's try that in the next two meetings and check in on Friday.

Phrases for difficult moments

01

TO BEGIN

"There is something important I would like us to discuss."
"I want to address this early before it becomes larger."

02

TO TEST AN ASSUMPTION

"I may not have the complete picture."
"Help me understand what was happening for you."

03

TO HANDLE DISAGREEMENT

"We may remember it differently. Let's establish what we can."
"We still need clarity about the expectation going forward."

04

TO SLOW THINGS DOWN

"Let's pause for a moment."
"I want to make sure I understand what you are saying."

05

TO ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR PART

"I can see that I did not make the expectation clear."
"I should have raised this earlier."

06

TO CLOSE

"What will you do differently next time?"
"Let's confirm what we have agreed."

When emotions rise

Emotion does not automatically mean the conversation has failed. People may feel embarrassed, surprised, misunderstood, angry, worried or disappointed.

SLOW DOWN

Lower your pace and volume. Do not match escalation.

ACKNOWLEDGE

Describe what you observe without labelling the person.

ALLOW A PAUSE

Silence can help people process what was said.

KEEP THE BOUNDARY

Empathy does not remove the expectation.

KNOW WHEN TO STOP

Pause if safety, misconduct or new facts require support.

Pause and seek HR or senior guidance if new allegations, safety concerns, serious misconduct or matters outside your authority emerge.

GORDON SAYS

Kindness is telling the truth without making cruelty part of the delivery.

Prepare the conversation

☐ I checked whether HR, my manager or a support person should be involved.

The specific issue I need to discuss

What I directly observed

The story I may be telling myself

The impact on people or work

My purpose and constructive outcome

My opening sentence

Agree, follow up and reflect

CONFIRM

- The issue was understood.
- Both perspectives were heard.
- The required change is clear.
- Support was identified.
- A review date was agreed.
- Appropriate notes were made.

REFLECT

- Was I specific?
- Did I listen properly?
- Did I become defensive?
- Did I preserve dignity?
- Is the next step actionable?
- Do I need to clarify anything?

Difficult conversations are not evidence that a working relationship has failed. Handled well, they are how working relationships remain honest.

Speak early enough that the issue is manageable. Listen carefully enough that your understanding can change.

