

HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE RESOURCE

It is highly likely that supervisors and managers will have to have a difficult conversation with their staff at some point during their tenure. These conversations may arise from misconduct issues, underperformance, or simply from leave requests or requests for a pay rise. Irrespective of the issue, it is important that any difficult conversations take place as soon as reasonably practicable. This ensures the staff member in question is treated with respect and the issue isn't allowed to linger.

It is imperative that all difficult conversations are undertaken carefully, and your organisation's approach is considered and meets any legislative requirements. Privacy and confidentiality requirements must be upheld with regards to the conversation and any subsequent follow-up, including the proper storage of documentation.

The following practical steps can assist supervisors and managers to navigate difficult conversations with their staff:

- **When meeting with a staff member be upfront about what the issue is** – state the issue straight away and be as direct as possible. Do not preface the conversation with small talk and do not sugar coat the issue.
- **Stick to the facts and use evidence to support your case** – do not rely on opinions or hearsay and give the staff member the right of reply. Give as many examples as possible as to why the issue is impacting your organisation.
- **Focus on the issue and not the person** – ensure nothing you say comes off as an attack on the person's character.
- **Listen to the staff member and consider their point of view** – there could be facts or situations you are unaware of that explain the behaviour/issue. Ensure you have an open mind going into the meeting and are open to an explanation from the staff member.
- **Be aware that the staff member could react emotionally** – consider telling the person they can bring a support person to the meeting and be aware that it may be a legal requirement for you to provide this option, especially where there are ongoing issues.
- **Be aware of your own emotions** – remain calm, objective, and focused on the issue at hand.
- **Ensure the conversation is solutions-focused** – allow the staff member to help determine possible solutions going forward to address the behaviour/issue.
- **Follow up the conversation in writing and formally document the conversation on the staff member's personal file** – this step is important to clarify that you and the staff member are on the same page about the issue and agree on the proposed solution. Both parties should sign off on any documentation. Such documentation may be necessary if the behaviour or issue continues in order for you to institute a formal disciplinary procedure or terminate the staff member.

If the staff member in question is a volunteer it is important to be mindful that they are willingly giving their time to your organisation. Be respectful of their voluntary contribution but do not allow it to be an excuse for inappropriate behaviour or underperformance. Difficult conversations can be harder with volunteers because they are under no obligation to attend the workplace.

The ideal result of a difficult conversation is for both parties to come to an agreement on how to rectify the behaviour or issue going forward. Gaining a commitment from the staff member to an action-plan increases the likelihood that the identified solution will be successful.



Make sure you follow through on any actions you have agreed to as a supervisor, manager, or on behalf of the organisation. Keep communication channels open so the staff member feels comfortable to re-visit the issue with you and let you know if they are having difficulty following through on their actions.

Unresolved workplace issues can be damaging to culture, morale, other staff, and can even threaten your organisation's reputation or funding. When difficult conversations are executed quickly they are more likely to lead to successful outcomes, and they can improve staff engagement resulting in a happier and more productive workplace.

These guidelines have been adapted from the Fair Work Ombudsman. To access a free, online course on having difficult conversations [click here](#).