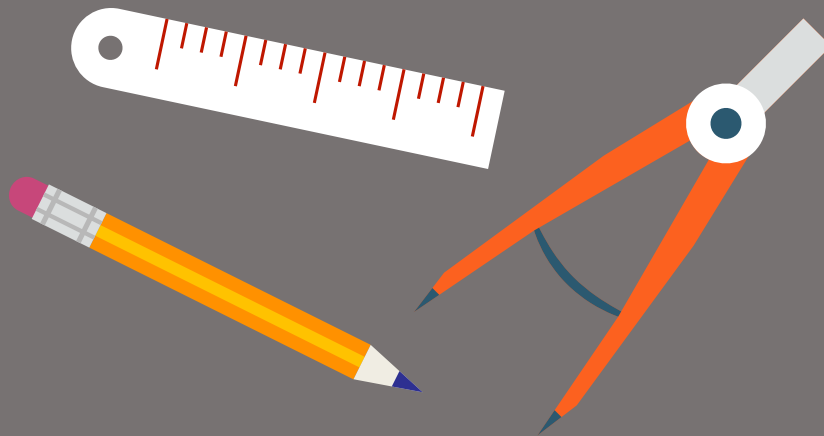


27 Scripts

Of What To Say In The Toughest Difficult Conversations



PRACTICAL TOOLS

27 Scripts Of What To Say In The Toughest Difficult Conversations



Have you ever had to fire anyone, or tell an employee that a raise won't be forthcoming after all? How about give a poor performance review? If so, then you know how stressful it can be to have that tough conversation.

Difficult conversations are pre-loaded with tension, then they play out in an emotional minefield that threatens to blow if the wrong word pops out.

A common problem with difficult conversations is they've often been simmering for too long. Anticipating the unpleasantness, managers avoid the talk ... and things get worse.

When the manager finally does have the talk, he fails to prepare. In an effort to soften the blow, the manager adopts a non-confrontational, fairly friendly tone while attempting to deliver a sharp and serious message.

The mismatch between the posture and the talking points leaves the listener confused.

At other times, leaders simply talk around problems or euphemize to the extent that their message loses its meaning.

Difficult conversations always require honest and direct language. They can best be tackled with sound preparation and clarity.

To that end, here are actual scripts you can use to prepare for 27 different kinds of difficult conversations that most managers will face, probably sooner in their careers than later.

Note: Each of the scripts is on a page by itself, so you can easily pull out the page or make a copy.

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1. The employee who smells bad

This is the classic tough conversation every manager dreads. But if foul odors are causing a stir, it's a conversation that must take place.

So, get the employee into a private and neutral area, maybe even outside to improve ventilation.

Here's what you can say:

John, this is an uncomfortable conversation for both of us, but I must call your attention to the fact that several of your co-workers have complained about unpleasant smells coming from your work area.

Apparently they are coming from you personally, not from food or anything else in your work area.

This is just as embarrassing for me to have to raise the issue with you as it probably is for you to have to hear it, but it has gotten to the point that I must ask you to do something about it.

It is affecting the ability of your co-workers to concentrate and do their work properly. I do not know if this is a matter of personal hygiene or of unwashed clothes, but I must ask you to attend to this matter.

You may not smell it yourself, but we do expect you to come to work bathed and wearing clean clothes.

Can I have your agreement that you will do that starting tomorrow? This is a serious matter, and if the complaints persist, I may have to send you home until the problem is resolved.

2. The employee who smells too good

There are those who overindulge in perfumes, colognes and toiletries, and overwhelm co-workers with the sheer strength of the aroma, forgetting that some employees have serious fragrance sensitivities to even small amounts of perfume.

Here's what you can say:

Mary, this is probably an uncomfortable conversation for both of us since I don't like to get involved with how people look and what they wear as long as it's up to the professional standards of this company.

But I must point out to you that I have received several complaints from your co-workers about the perfume (or scent) that you are wearing. Some people have complained that it is making them ill and affecting their ability to do their work.

You do know that people suffer from all kinds of allergies. What may be a very nice scent to you or to someone else may make a third person physically ill.

Out of respect for your co-workers' health and sensitivities, I must ask you to refrain from wearing perfume to work. Switching brands will probably not be good enough.

It would be best to leave the perfume at home when you come to work. Can I have your agreement on that?

[If the person protests, let them vent. Then counter with this:]

I'm afraid this is not negotiable. When I have received complaints from your co-workers that they cannot do their jobs properly, I must ask you to refrain from using perfume. If the situation is not corrected, I will have to send you home until it is.

3. When an employee does not dress properly

If your organization has a fairly clear and strict dress code policy (think U.S. Army, UPS, etc.) then improper dress is not likely an issue. But for the rest of us, even minor variations of commonly accepted business dress standards can create unproductive distractions. Employees can be honestly confused about what is acceptable. So your place has a dress down Friday where blue jeans are OK to wear. But skinny jeans? Then how skinny?

Fair-minded managers are free to decide when dress is inappropriate without a Supreme Court justice standing nearby to interpret. You know it when you see it and it's your call, as long as you enforce it equally.

Here's what you can say:

Look, Mary, what you are wearing to work today is not appropriate for this environment.

[If you do have a dress code, refer to it and point out the specific section that the employee is in violation of. If there is no dress code, point out specifically why the dress is inappropriate (offensive lettering on T-shirts or sweatshirts, clothing that is too revealing, or too tattered, etc.) and continue with this:]

What you are wearing today is distracting to other employees (and customers, if appropriate) and therefore it is detrimental to our business.

I must ask you to go home right now and not come back to work until you can dress properly for this environment. Is that clear, or do you have any other questions?

[Then be prepared in some cases to handle the pushback. Many people will point out that they only wore the outfit because co-workers have worn similar outfits in the past. You'll need to address that going forward.]

4. When an employee complains about a raise

These can be morale killers for good employees who genuinely believe they earned a raise. But good employees will also understand the financial standing of their employer, too.

You can begin the discussion with this:

John, I understand that you wanted to talk about the reasons why you did not get a salary increase this year (or a smaller salary increase than you were used to getting in past years, as the case may be).

I'll be glad to talk to you about that so you understand. You know that salary increases are not guaranteed at this company.

Salary increases can only be awarded when the company is doing well, and when the employee has made a substantial contribution to that increased business performance.

No company can afford to increase its costs in any area where revenues are flat or are going down. Then we would all lose our jobs soon.

Your last performance review pointed out what you can do next year to help increase overall results for the company. Help us do that and maybe we can have a different conversation next year.

[If the employee protests that he or she knows a co-worker did get a raise (or a larger raise) then you can say:]

We do encourage people not to talk about their pay, and you should be careful about believing everything you hear.

What is important is to discuss your specific contributions to the company and what those contributions need to be in the coming months.

5. When people are physically fighting

Physical altercations are extraordinary events that require some cautions. First, obviously, separate the combatants if necessary by involving security or the police. Do not put yourself in physical danger. Next, if your company has a zero-tolerance policy that requires immediate dismissal, HR should be notified to handle the termination. However, if the behavior exhibited was not severe and is an aberration, you might consider giving them a second chance.

Here's what you can say:

At this point, we are not too interested in who was at fault and who started it. What matters is that the outcome was unacceptable.

You do know that fighting is a serious violation of company policy on proper behavior at work, don't you? *[Wait for answer.]*
We will have to put a written reprimand in your file about this and we must warn you that this is your last chance here.

Any repeat of this behavior will not be tolerated and will result in your immediate dismissal. We will talk to the other person involved as well, but what is most important, apart from the safety of our employees while at work, is that there no be no further disruptions of the work here.

If I send you back to your work station right now, can I be totally sure that you will behave properly while at work and that it's over now?

And I also need to have your commitment that you will not wait for the other person outside the company gate at the end of your workday to resume this off-hours and off-premises, OK? *[Again, wait for answer.]*

Any off-site altercation with this person at this point will be treated as if it occurred onsite. Do you understand?

6. When people quarrel over small issues

Some people just love to bicker over anything and then revel in their own indignation for being so disrespected. It's enough to test any manager's patience. On the other hand, sometimes there is good reason for people to be bothered. So, when a situation crops up, listen to the employee's complaint about a fellow-worker's behavior and ascertain whether it is a legitimate issue that affects other workers' concentration and job performance.

For example: "He smacks his mouth while eating his lunch at his desk" may not be worthy of intervention ("Try to go and eat your lunch someplace else, and try to get along ..."). But other issues, like loud and continuous belching, may require your intervention.

If so, here's help:

Peter, we've we have received serious complaints from some of your co-workers working near you. It seems that they say their concentration and therefore their ability to do their jobs properly is seriously disturbed because you _____ *[be specific about the alleged offending behavior]*.

I'd like to understand this a little better.
Are you aware that you are doing this?

Do you think it could be due to a medical condition? Have you seen a healthcare professional about this and are you making progress toward solving this problem?

Do you think you can control it? Can I have your promise that this problem will be solved and that I will hear no further complaints about this from your co-workers?

[The point is to get the employee's commitment to solve the problem. Also, consider if there is any way the company can help, perhaps by directing the person toward the type of professional help needed.]

7. When people are doing just the minimum

An independent and engaged staff should be every good manager's goal. That's why having employees who just do the minimum can't be tolerated. First, you're simply not getting much bang for your company's buck. And perhaps even worse, it's a morale killer. Other employees quickly figure out who is pulling more than their fair share and who is hiding in the shadows until pay day rolls around again.

Also, good people like to be pushed, and sometimes we all fall into a rut. Lighting the fire under some and giving them a good reason to re-engage may be just what the doctor ordered. To do this, get the employee behind closed doors for a one-on-one session.

You can say something like the following:

Mary, when you started off here in this job, we all thought that you showed a lot of promise to become one of the best workers here. We all believed in you and were sure you would do well.

Lately we don't see any signs of that anymore. Would you agree that based on your recent performance, we couldn't honestly call you one of our best employees anymore?

You don't seem to be putting in a complete effort. We're trying to find out why. Is there anything physically the matter with you that prevents you from giving your best effort? If so, we'd like to see what we can do to help you overcome this problem.

We're concerned about you. Is everything at home alright? You don't have trouble concentrating? Our team relies on you and everyone else performing at a high level. It wouldn't be fair for others to pick up the slack for you.

As long as you really want to keep this job, we need to figure out what we can do to get you back to your customary good performance and for you to meet or exceed our high standards.

8. When people are habitually late

People who regularly show up late for work not only hurt the company, but they can cause dissent among the rest of your employees.

The conversation with an hourly employee who punches a clock and will get docked is a bit different than the salaried employee.

For hourly employees, say something like the following:

John, we have noticed that you have been late for work XX times this past month *[give specifics that are not open to argument]*.

You may have called your supervisor and explained the reason, but we are looking at a pattern here. You know that lateness affects your take-home pay since you get paid by the hour, but the bite taken out of your paychecks hasn't seemed to make a difference.

This is a serious issue that needs to be corrected because it affects the performance of the entire department and the company since your not being here on time holds up other people and interrupts the work flow.

You need to understand the consequences of your actions. Now, is there some problem that prevents you from being on time for work every day? Is there anything anyone else can do to help you with that issue?

[Be careful if they mention an issue that could qualify them for intermittent unpaid leave under the Family & Medical Leave Act – FMLA – in which case it is best to turn the issue over to HR for further action.]

If there is not, then can I have your commitment that you will be here on time every day from now on? Thank you."

For a salaried employee, say something like the following:

Mary, we have noticed that you have been late for work XX times this past month *[give specifics that are not open to argument]*. You may have called your supervisor and explained the reason, but we are looking at a pattern here.

We may have to start tracking the instances of your lateness for payroll purposes if this pattern continues. In any event, this is a serious issue that needs to be corrected because it affects the performance of the entire department and the company because your not being here on time holds up other people and interrupts the work flow.

You need to understand the consequences of your actions. Now, is there some problem that prevents you from being on time for work every day? Is there anything anyone else can do to help you with that issue?

[Be careful if they mention an issue that could qualify them for intermittent unpaid leave under the Family & Medical Leave Act – FMLA – in which case it is best to turn the issue over to HR for further action.]

If there is not, then can I have your commitment that you will be here on time every day from now on? Thank you.

9. When people are absent excessively

For excessive absences, you can say:

John, you have missed a lot of time from work recently. You do seem to call in and let your immediate supervisor know, although you don't give much notice in many cases.

You may well have the time coming to you under our sick leave and vacation policies, although you must be getting close to your limit and you ought to check just how much time you have remaining before you get a surprise in the form of a smaller paycheck.

In any event, the fact remains that you have taken more time off than anyone else on our team. You do good work and we need you on our team. We just want to make sure that there isn't some issue that you need help with to make it to work on a regular basis.

We're concerned about you. We want to make sure that you're physically OK, and if you need help, we can see what we can do to help. Is there anything you can tell me to give me the confidence that we can count on you on a regular basis?

[Be careful if they mention an issue that could qualify them for intermittent unpaid leave under the Family & Medical Leave Act – FMLA – in which case it is best to turn the issue over to HR for further action.]

10. When there is suspicion of domestic abuse

The effects of domestic violence don't stop at the door to the workplace. To the contrary, domestic violence is everyone's problem: Not only is it morally reprehensible, it affects profitability and safety.

Domestic abuse cuts across all strata of society. The victims can work on the factory floor or in the executive suites.

When someone shows physical injuries or signs of abuse, it's time to act.

In private, say something like the following:

Mary, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. Some of your co-workers have asked me to speak to you because they're worried about you. They have noted that on several occasions recently, you have come to work showing signs of injury, bruises and cuts.

It appears you have always told them that you were clumsy, that you ran into a car door, or had an accident in the kitchen. Your colleagues and all us care about you, and we can't help wondering if there isn't something else going on, something bigger that you may need help with.

You're probably a very private person and it may be difficult for you to talk about these issues, but we can refer you to people who can help.

First of all, we want to guarantee your safety at work if you should ever fear that someone might come and interfere with you here.

We can also arrange for confidential interviews with the police or other authorities if you should need protection elsewhere.

We care about you and we want to help you.

11. When there is suspicion of substance abuse

One in five workers report they've had to redo work or cover for a co-worker, or have been put in danger or injured as a result of a fellow employee's substance abuse.

If you suspect that someone at work has a substance abuse problem, here's what you can do.

In private, say something like the following:

John, some of your colleagues are worried about you. In recent days and weeks, it doesn't seem like you're yourself some of the time.

You seem irritable, you seem absent-minded and we can't help noticing that *[mention any physical signs, such as dripping nose, bloodshot eyes, trembling hands, etc.]*.

You do exhibit some of the signs of substance abuse.

Before you get too defensive and start denying everything, please hear me out. You've been a good employee here and we want you here, but we need you to be here 100% in mind and body.

We need your best efforts at this job and lately we feel we may not have been getting it.

Our first concern is for you. If you need help, we want to get it to you, for your own health and wellbeing as well as for your co-workers who depend on you doing your job so they can do theirs.

Is there a problem you'd like to tell us about? I assure you that on the basis of what you say now, no punitive action will be taken against you at this time. This is a conversation to get you any help you may need.

12. When people are insubordinate

While the word insubordinate can refer to anyone who is disrespectful or defiant, the workplace definition is generally more explicit.

Insubordination usually means one of two situations: An employee refuses a direct order from a superior, or the employee and superior have an overly heated confrontation.

Insubordination has steep consequences because the employee is essentially breaching his employment contract, refusing to do work. Insubordination results when an employee has received and understood a direct order, but refuses to obey. Either the employee has made an explicit statement of refusal or simply did not complete the task. Even if the employee thinks the order is unfair, it's still his responsibility to comply.

However, when the employee reasonably believes that fulfilling the order is illegal or will immediately endanger him or others, he is generally protected by state and federal labor laws from repercussions for not doing performing the task.

When a clear case of insubordination occurs, it can never be overlooked, or it will be repeated.

Here's what you can say:

John, I just asked you to do something *[describe the request or assignment]* and you refused to do it. You must understand that is not acceptable. It is insubordination and we cannot tolerate such behavior here. If it is not corrected, it is cause for immediate termination.

So let me explain what needs to be done here and why. *[Explain]*

I will now give you one more chance to accept this work assignment and give us your very best effort on this task. Do you understand?

13. When people are argumentative

In work, as in life, some differences of opinion are bound to happen, simply because no two people are alike.

Sometimes these differences don't get settled very well and result in an employee being argumentative in a way that undermines authority. You must deal with these employees quickly to prevent the behavior from worsening.

This means communicating with the employee in a respectful way and discussing the problem based on facts rather than emotions.

A word of caution: Do not presume the employee knows he has been argumentative. He may have been trying to assert himself to show independence, for example, and people do not always perceive the same situation in the same way.

Generally it helps to give specific examples of overly argumentative interactions, so the offending person can better understand.

In private, say something like the following:

John, in recent weeks you have grown to be argumentative and you have become an obstructionist.

We need to get you back on track and to get on with the job here, and your constant arguments are holding us up.

You are prolonging the discussion well past the point of reason. We have heard your arguments, and we have considered them.

We have explained why we have decided to go forward on the present plan. We need everyone's cooperation for that plan to succeed. The time for arguments is past.

Do you understand and can I have your agreement that we will go forward and all pull together on this?

14. When people exhibit bullying behavior

At its simplest, bullying is using force or coercion to abuse or intimidate others. It tends to be habitual, and psychologists tell us it's associated with an imbalance of social and physical power.

The other thing psychology has learned about bullying is that it is habit-forming. And because it is habit forming, bullies find ways to persist by disguising their intentions. Hence, their behaviors usually aren't as obvious as the classic schoolyard bully we all knew (or knew of) growing up.

In fact, the truth about bullying is it is one of the more subtle and misunderstood problems facing employers.

And because of that, these destructive behaviors tend to go uncorrected.

In private, say something like the following:

Peter, I have received complaints about your behavior toward ____ (and ____).

Your behavior was out of line. We do not tolerate bullying in our workplace. Other people are intimidated by you and are physically scared of you.

Regardless of the issue, and regardless of what anyone may have done wrong, we do not treat our employees that way. It is not the way to get their best work out of them and it is not how we treat people at our organization.

In the future, if you want to continue to work here, you must approach all co-workers with respect, in a more collegial and professional way.

I cannot have any more complaints that you are behaving like a bully. Do you understand?

15. When people complain about being bullied

Ever wonder just how big a problem workplace bullying really is? A 2010 Workplace Bullying Institute research survey said:

- 35% of workers surveyed personally experienced bullying behavior while on the job.
- 68% of bullying is same-gender harassment.

Workplace bullying leads to employee stress and that can impact workplace productivity, quality of work, and it can have negative financial impacts on the victim.

Meet with the alleged victim in private and say something like:

Mary, thank you for bringing this behavior by _____ to our attention. If what you say happened is true – and I have no reason to doubt it at this time – then we owe you an apology.

We will speak to _____ to get his/her version of the story, and we will explain to him/her that this is not the way we treat co-workers and colleagues here.

We expect all employees, including our supervisors, to treat all employees with respect.

As we investigate this matter, do you fear that _____ might retaliate in some way against you for having brought this to our attention?

Is there any way we can or should separate the two of you until this matter is sorted out?

We will get back to you, but you do understand we must speak to _____ and possibly others who may have been witnesses to the incident(s) that you are bringing to our attention.

16. When someone complains about a theft

You may think that stealing at work doesn't happen often, or that only really bad employees steal. But according to TNS Employee Insights, 46% of employees have stolen from their organization. That includes everything, like taking home a coffee packet from the lunchroom or a roll of tissue from the bathroom.

Personal theft among employees creates a big concern when it happens. Generally, workers feel safe in their environment and become lax about putting away purses, or money, or even a camera or smart phone. When an employee reports a personal theft at work, you need to act.

Talk to the person in private and say something like the following:

Mary, you have made a rather serious accusation here, and we want to be sure that we will investigate this to the fullest.

We want all our employees to feel safe here at work, both in their person and with their physical possessions. Now, would you tell me please what is missing from your purse?

When did you last see these items and when were you sure they were still there? When did you notice them gone?

Was there any time in that interval that your purse was not within your immediate field of vision?

Do you have any idea where the items went or who may have taken them? Why do you say that?

Of course you have the right to go to the police and file a report with them. What would you like the company to do?

[Whenever a personal theft is reported or confirmed, it's always a good idea to send around a general safety message to all employees about guarding valuables at work.]

17. When people complain about shifts or assignments

Oh, if people would just show up and do their jobs, life would be so much easier. Right?

But people have lives outside work, too, so displeasure over shift assignments is here to stay. And for good reason.

Parents working the overnight shift, for instance, are probably grumpy and irritable at home during the day, and that creates stress. Or, they don't get to see their children because they are at work when their children are at home, or they are at home when their children are in school.

It's also been clearly shown that rotating shifts can create serious health issues for employees.

Good managers are wise to be sympathetic to the reality that scheduling can create real personal issues – even if the problem can't be easily solved.

When the issue crops up, try this discussion:

Peter, I understand that you don't much like your present shift assignment. Can you explain to me why? *[Wait for answer.]*

Ok, I understand what you're saying. Right now, I do not have another shift (assignment) available to you.

The job you're doing is important and you're doing a good job of it. I will take your request for a transfer to a different shift (assignment) under advisement, and as soon as there is an opening elsewhere, we can talk.

I need you to have a little patience on this matter, OK?

[You may also want to refer to shift seniority rules if there are any.]

18. When people complain about their work space

They don't like their desk. They don't like their cubicle.
They don't like the person sitting next to them.

Good employees want to feel "at home" at work. They want to be comfortable and spend time in an environment they feel is best suited to them. Good employees feel they've earned the right to "good space."

Nobody likes it when the guy across the room, who does almost nothing, just happens to have the biggest desk or best location. Or when the person next to them smacks gum, hums or smells. Workspace matters.

Managers should recognize that the work environment impacts productivity and take proactive steps to do what they can to change that environment for everyone's benefit

But what do you do when you can't do anything for the complaining employee?

In private, say something like:

John, I understand that you would like to move to a different desk (or cubicle or office). Can you explain to me why? *[Wait for answer.]*

I see. So I understand you to say that your neighbor is getting on your nerves and not letting you concentrate on your work, is that it?

Have you talked to this co-worker about the offending behavior?
Have you talked to your immediate supervisor about this?

Would you like us to approach him/her to ask him/her to stop this behavior?

You just want to get as far as possible away from him/her? Well, let's see what we have available. You may have to have a little patience...

19. When someone is 'dissed' on social media

Social media and blogs have become popular forums for harassment, and it's easy to see why. Harassers have the benefit of anonymity, lack of confrontation and can have widespread impact with a single click. On top of that, tweets and posts can be made without much thought and be misinterpreted. Needless to say, social media has changed the landscape of the workplace and brought with it benefits and problems.

So, what should you do if an employee comes to you to complain about what another employee said about her online?

Try this discussion:

Mary, how do you know that they have written this about you on their Facebook pages? Are you friends and did you read it yourself, or did someone tell you about it? How do you know it's really up there? Have you seen a printout of it?

Why is this so upsetting to you? You realize that this is a private activity that is difficult to control for the company.

Does this in any way affect the way you're supposed to do your job?

Have you approached this person directly and asked him/her to take down the offending comments?

Do you feel you two need to be separated at work because of this issue?

[Note: Policies designed to handle harassment on social media are a great start – but be careful. A National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) memorandum demonstrates that policies must be carefully crafted to avoid running afoul of the law. For instance, a social media rule is considered unlawful if it can be interpreted as chilling an employee's right to share and discuss their terms and conditions of employment with both co-workers and outsiders alike.]

20. When people say, 'That's not my job.'

Being told "That's not my job," when you assign a task to an employee is often a guaranteed route to the unemployment line. But everybody deserves a second chance, right?

Well, if they do deserve another chance, here's what you can say:

John, I was surprised to hear you say that. It's not something we say around here at our company.

We pride ourselves on a collegial atmosphere and we try to help each other when we can. We are all interdependent here. If we can, we try to help each other out.

Why were you so dismissive of a colleague's request for help, even if it went beyond your immediate area of responsibility?

Most people around here are glad to help.

[A great way to eliminate this behavior is to lead by example. If we want employees to take responsibility, we need to also take responsibility. Simple little things like picking up a piece of trash on the floor encourages others to do more. Similarly, don't turn a blind eye to an undesirable condition. Fix it. When employees see their managers walking the talk, it will become part of expected behavior and "that's not my job" goes out the window.]

21. When people say, 'That's not my fault.'

Getting employees to take responsibility – and ultimately ownership – is every manager's dream goal.

One key is to set the stage to help it happen.

You can best do that by:

- Allowing mistakes. An employee who is not allowed to make mistakes – who is criticized or punished for making the wrong choice – soon stops making any choices. Instead, use these opportunities as a chance to learn how to make better choices.
- Sharing your vision. Employees are far more willing to work hard and take responsibility if they understand the larger goals and context of their work.
- Sharing information. Many managers hoard information. This means employees often don't understand the implications of their actions.
- Losing the "my way or the highway" attitude. Leaders like to be in control. But as long as goals are being met, give employees room to implement strategies in their own ways. They might even surprise you and come up with better ideas than your own.

Still, a manager's best laid plans don't always work out that way, and some employees will shirk responsibilities.

When they do, in private, say something like the following:

Peter, we are not on a finger-pointing or fault-finding exercise here. We want to know what happened, what went wrong and why, and we want to take measures that the same mistakes are not repeated.

I'm sure you'll agree with that goal.

Can we count on your cooperation to achieve that goal?

22. When people say, 'That can't be done.'

This is one of the great copouts. It's an attempt to end the conversation before it begins. To get past it, take the employee to a private area.

Say something like the following:

John, I was surprised to hear you say that. Our employees have a can-do attitude around here.

This may be difficult to achieve, but there must be a way. We can't give up before we even try.

Now let's examine this. Why did you say that this cannot be done? Can we approach it from another side?

What must happen first before this can be done? How we can remove those roadblocks and obstacles?

Or how can we shift other work and change things around to give priority to this? If you look at it from those angles, there's always a way.

So help me out with this.

23. 'You're always on the phone and it's not business ...'

People making too many personal calls on company time not only saps that person's productivity and work output, but it affects those working around the person as well as they are forced, against their will, to listen over the cubicle walls to the daily doses of drama in the co-worker's personal life. We all make some personal calls from the office, but we should try to keep it short.

Here's what you can say:

Peter, it has been noted that you're on the phone a lot on personal business. Is there some ongoing crisis in your personal life that makes this necessary for the time being?

Again, get past the initial denials and the possible counter-accusations and finger-pointing at others, but insist that this particular employee's situation exceeds all accepted norms and needs to be solved.

[Finger-pointing at others should be deflected immediately:]

We're here to talk about you. We're not here to talk about anyone else right now. If others abuse the freedom we allow people, they will be dealt with at the appropriate time. But we're here to talk about you only.

[The same can be applied in situations where it has been noted that employees are spending too much time on Facebook, updating their own status or checking on their "friends," or playing addictive computer games like Candy Crush.]

24. 'You don't play well with others ...'

Among all the difficult conversations, this may be one of the toughest ones to have with an employee, because by the very nature of the accusation, there is a considerable degree of subjectivity involved. An accusation of not being a team player usually meets with an initial denial. The person so accused may well – and probably will – reply that he or she is doing everything right and it's all the others on the team who are ganging up on him/her. Still, if six or seven people all say they find it difficult to work with that particular person, and you've noticed the person's disruptive behavior yourself, it's time to confront the person.

You may say something like:

Mary, the last two of three meetings I attended with your team were not productive. We got involved in personal diatribes and you were involved in all of them. Is there a problem between you and other members of the team that I should be aware of?

[Give the person a chance to explain his/her side of the story, and possibly vent some more in frustration and anger. Maybe he/she felt slighted at some point and wants to hit back. Explore any other possible underlying causes. Maybe there is some long-dormant issue that, if resolved, could change the person's attitude. In any event, the person must be made to see that continuing disruptive behavior in meetings is not acceptable. You may have to draw a picture what acceptable behavior would look like.]

You say your issue was _____. Here's a better way you could have raised that potentially legitimate concern. You could have said: 'I'm concerned how we would deal with _____.'

[In the end, insist on an agreement that the person will not sidetrack further team meetings with personal diatribes, and will bring up legitimate issues in a professional way.]

25. 'You have been known to spread rumors ...'

This is a nasty situation that managers sometimes find themselves having to deal with. Let's face it, people love to gossip, and some level of talk and speculation about co-workers' personal lives is to be expected.

Managers may have to step in, however, when malicious rumors are being spread about people, or about the company itself. Idle speculation about who may be having an affair in the office can not only ruin office morale (people will immediately suspect favored treatment), but can also ruin careers, reputations and marriages. Idle speculations about layoffs or division closures can be just as damaging on another level.

Both need to be dealt with forcefully by managers. You need to call the probable source of the rumor into your office – or speak to a whole group of people if you cannot identify one individual source – and lay it on the line:

It has come to my attention that there is a rumor circulating here in the office about _____. As far as we can tell, there is no basis for this rumor. Repeating it may do irreparable harm to certain people or to this organization. Please do not retell it, and tell anyone who wants to tell you about it that you don't want to hear it. Is that clear?

[Once again, there may be some vehement protestations of innocence ("it wasn't me"). At this point it doesn't matter who started it. Everyone you spoke to is on notice that no one should participate in spreading the rumor any further.]

26. 'You have a bad attitude ...'

This is another one of those difficult conversations tough to approach because some subjective judgment is involved. A conversation on this topic could well degenerate into a children's playground retort: "I say you have a bad attitude." Reply: "Well, I don't." Where do you go from there?

The problem is that the word "attitude" is probably the subjective sum of a series of behaviors or behavioral traits that are not appropriate for the workplace because they are needlessly disruptive.

Managers may be better off talking to employees who exhibit bad attitudes about the specific behaviors that collectively added up to the bad attitude.

Here's what you can say:

John, on this occasion, you did or said (_____). That was not helpful and went directly against the company's interests and what the company is trying to achieve. On another occasion, you did or said (_____). That bordered on disloyalty and insubordination. We're getting a picture that leaves a lot to be desired; it's as if you don't really want to be here.

I'd like to hear from you that you really do want to be here, and how you plan to show that more clearly in the future.

[Once again, brushing aside any denials and protestations of innocence, insist that the person make a greater effort to control the specific offensive behaviors brought to his/her attention as evidence of the bad attitude.]

27. 'You're too negative ...'

Naysayers can sap the energy out of any organization. There is a difference between constant negativity and a healthy dose of skepticism, which every company needs. When discussing new initiatives, every team needs someone who asks, "If there is one reason why this wouldn't work, what would it be? And how can we guard against that?"

Skeptics are welcome and needed in any organization. Professional naysayers are not. There is a difference between panning all new ideas and always offering a kneejerk reaction: "We've never done it that way," or "It'll never work around here," on the one hand, and trying to make things better by trying to foresee unanticipated consequences. Skeptics who try to guard against worst-possible scenarios should always be encouraged; naysayers who never offer any positive suggestions for improvements should be discouraged.

Here's one way to confront such habitual spreaders of negativity:

Peter, we've noticed you've been opposed to the last five new ideas people have offered around here. In any of those meetings, you have not offered a single idea of your own to make things better. Is there a possibility you're being too negative?

[You may have to listen to denials and protestations that the person is just trying to prevent the organization from making a terrible mistake – they know how things have been done, etc. Let them boast about how much they know.]

Then turn the conversation around and stress that the problem is not how much they know – everyone respects his or her knowledge. The problem is the constant negativity. Urge the person to couch any future objections in terms of a positive suggestion to make things better, or to be specific as to what they see as a potential glitch. Challenge them to make a greater contribution to the organization by improving on the ideas of others with their knowledge, instead of just breaking everything down.]

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