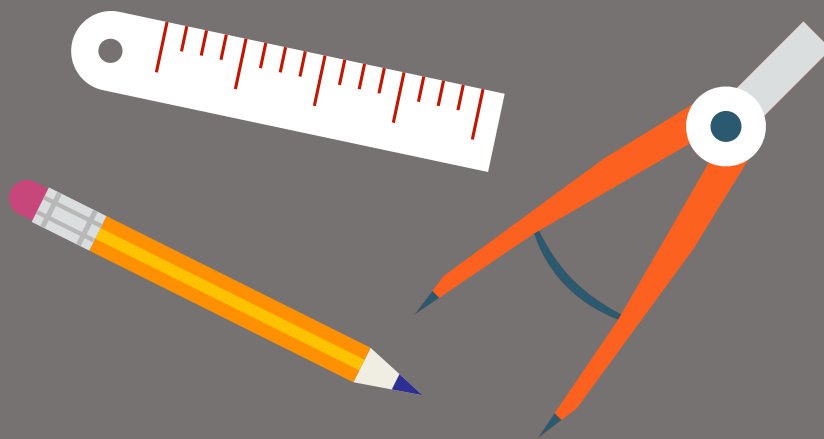


25 Things To Never Say During A Difficult Conversation



PRACTICAL TOOLS

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There are simply some things you should never say during a conversation, either because they are inappropriate or they will lead you down the wrong path. Steering clear of these 25 is a good start:

1. "How about them Cowboys last night? ..."

Any attempt at starting off with small talk, about the local sports teams or about the weather, is probably misplaced. It sends the wrong message that this will be a friendly conversation and delays the inevitable. Better to barge right in: "I've asked you to come and speak to me today because I'm concerned about ..."

2. "You feel alright? ..."

It doesn't matter how the other person is feeling. Whether they're feeling great or rotten, you're going ahead anyway bringing to their attention what you must raise with them. They don't have an out for feeling badly.

3. "This is going to be difficult ..."

It's not going to be difficult for you – you're simply doing your duty as a manager or supervisor. Whether it's going to be difficult or not for the other person depends on them and their

reaction to the issues you must raise with them. Don't let them prepare their defenses and get their back up in advance.

4. "I'm sorry to have to raise this with you ..."

Never start by apologizing. Don't start off on the defensive or from a position of weakness. You are totally within your rights and your duties to raise the issue with the other person. Just start right in with the issue that must be resolved. If anyone is going to do any apologizing, it is going to be the other person after the error of his/her ways has been pointed out and he/she agrees to solve the problem.

5. "This is so embarrassing ..."

It shouldn't be embarrassing to you to talk about anything that needs to be talked about in the workplace. It may be embarrassing to the other person. Let them say it if anyone's going to say it. Nothing should faze you.

6. "How's the family – the wife and kids? ..."

This is not going to be a nice chat about how each other's families are doing. It's best not to bring the families into it. You will have some difficult things to say to the person about a work situation, so it's inappropriate to bring the wife and children into it. Any attempt to do so may well backfire and engender increased hostility.

7. "Now you've made me really mad ..."

The other person is likely to get emotional, and even angry, during a difficult conversation. But you always keep your cool. The angrier they get, the calmer you should get. Let them vent,

then say, "When you've calmed down, perhaps we can continue our discussion ..."

8. "@!#\$%%&!*&"

The other person may use foul language when angry, but never stoop to that level. Remaining the picture of calm and serenity requires that you abstain from using foul language yourself.

9. "Please don't cry ... I can't stand women's tears ..."

Any employee may cry, both men and women, when confronted with unpleasant truths or shortcomings in their behavior. Indicating that you expect it from women is patronizing and shows a bias against female employees that could come back to bite you in the end. Whatever the gender of the other person, it's a good idea to have a box of Kleenex at hand and give them a moment to compose themselves before continuing the conversation.

10. "They want me to talk to you about ..."

Don't hide behind others when approaching a difficult conversation. Face up to it. You're the manager or the supervisor. This is something you have to do. Blaming others for making you do this is a big sign of weakness. It sounds like you're not really in agreement with doing this – therefore the employee may not take the conversation very seriously.

11. "You're always ..."

Generalizations always get you in trouble, and invariably invite an argument. No, the person will say, "I don't always do this."

It's better to point out specifics: On such-and-such a date, in such-and-such a place, you did this. That's what we need to talk about.

12. "You just have a bad attitude ..."

That's a very subjective statement, and also extremely open to argument. Point out specific behaviors that may add up to a bad attitude, and explain why those specific behaviors are unacceptable in the workplace.

13. "So-and-so is much better at this than you ... why can't you be more like him/her?"

All comparisons are odious. People don't like to be compared to others. More importantly, they can't become somebody they're not. Plus, this is a conversation about them, not someone else. Tell them exactly what they need to improve and how you think they can best do that.

14. "I see you have a nice new car ..."

Any attempt to start the conversation with such an ice breaker about a supposedly "safe" subject ("Have you tried that new restaurant around the corner yet for lunch?" falls into the same category) will likely fall totally flat. You're not there to talk about his or her new car or the new restaurant. Dispense with ice breakers or preliminaries and get right to the subject matter at hand.

15. "I'm going to cut you some slack because you're close to retirement ..."

Never say anything about anyone's age – especially if they're over 40. A statement like that is *prima facie*

evidence of age discrimination by management and can get your company in serious trouble.

16. “Maybe we should continue this another time ...”

Many people will do anything to thwart a manager’s purpose in a difficult conversation by stonewalling, emotional outburst, and the whole gamut of delaying tactics in order not to have to come to grips with the issue. Don’t let them. After they’ve vented, gently steer the conversation back to the topic at hand and try to get some agreement on what should happen in the future.

17. “You’re just no good (or worse, a real lazy s-o-b or some other insult) ...”

The person in a difficult conversation may provoke you and try your patience, but never stoop to name-calling, which is never conducive to getting any kind of agreement and leaves you open to legal action.

18. “How am I doing so far? ...”

From time to time it may be a good idea to test for any agreement on the part of the other person – are they agreeing with you that there is a problem that needs to be solved? But never couch it in terms of giving them the power of judgment over you. Don’t allow them to sit in judgment of you. A better question may be: “Do you understand everything so far?”

19. “He/she will also be talked to the same way ...”

Employees trying to wriggle out of difficult conversations will often say that other employees are doing or have done the

same thing and will question why they aren't facing the same kind of discipline. Don't commit too readily to administer the same treatment to others alleged to be doing the same thing. If the information is credible, you may want to pursue it later, but don't let this difficult conversation get side-tracked by such finger-pointing and blame-deflecting tactics: "We're here to talk about you and what you did (or didn't do)."

20. "You just have to do better ... I'm not very pleased with you ..."

Vagueness is one of the most deadly sins in difficult conversations. The employee probably has no idea what you're talking about and worse has no idea what he/she should do differently in the future. No change is likely to occur. Always be specific in difficult conversations.

21. "Nobody likes you ..."

Work is not a popularity contest. It shouldn't matter whether someone is liked by colleagues. The only thing that matters is whether the person is competent, performs the duties of the position adequately, and is not a disruptive influence among the staff. If he/she does things that disrupt the rest of the staff, be specific and demand that such behaviors stop, but don't put it in terms of likeability or popularity.

22. "Can we still be friends? ..."

You should never aspire to be friends with any of your direct reports – that's always an unhealthy relationship that is bound to trigger suspicions of favoritism among the rest of the staff. A resolution of a problem through a difficult

conversation shouldn't be aimed at becoming "friends" with the person that has the problem. Mutual respect and adherence to company policies is all you want.

23. "Pity me – now I've got to talk to Joe Blow about something really horrible he did ..."

Some managers and supervisors try to make the person they have to talk to in a difficult conversation feel a little better by saying there are other employees who did things that are even worse. Or they're trying to get sympathy for themselves for having to face an even more difficult conversation. That's always a bad idea, for several reasons. You may be violating a confidentiality by revealing details about the next conversation you will have, and the person you just talked to doesn't really care about the other person, or even about how difficult your life is. They're too wrapped up in themselves.

24. "I'm your only defender here – other people didn't want to hire you in the first place ..."

Some inexperienced managers and supervisors try to forge a bond with the person they need to have a difficult conversation with hoping that whatever criticism they have to deliver will be more readily accepted that way. This is a misplaced attempt to create an "us vs. them" mentality. Even if such a statement were true, don't let on to the employee that there was any kind of dissension in the management ranks. It doesn't do anyone any good, least of all the employee you're talking to. He/she will be even more destabilized and therefore may even act more defensively.

25. “I’ve got only 10 minutes so let’s get this over with ...”

Don’t look at your watch, and don’t cut people off prematurely. Schedule difficult conversations toward the end of the day so you’re not pressed to go to other appointments. Don’t “invent” other appointments in an attempt to cut a difficult conversation short. You want to give the other person the idea you are willing to hear them out and let them present their side of the story. You want to show that you at least listened to them. Sometimes that’s all people want – to be listened to. Don’t take that away from them.

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