

# THE Advisor

## Difficult Conversations



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*Difficult conversations may be challenging and stressful on both a personal and professional basis.*

Being a manager sometimes means having difficult conversations with your direct reports. If you struggle with knowing what to say when you have to deliver bad news or address a performance concern, these tips may help:

- **Plan ahead.** If you need to have a difficult conversation with an employee, prepare in advance. Create talking points that you can refer to throughout the meeting. (Avoid creating a word-for-word script, as this may come across as stilted or insincere.) Determine what

information is best covered in this conversation and what could be saved for a follow-up discussion.

- **Seek guidance.** Ask your manager if they have any suggestions for how to handle the conversation. The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is also available to help you prepare for a challenging discussion.
- **Schedule an in-person meeting.** If you can't have the conversation in person, schedule a video conference. Being face-to-face with the employee and observing their reactions will help you create rapport and respond with empathy.
- **Focus on results.** It is not unusual to feel anxious about a difficult conversation. Keep in mind that addressing the situation is the only way to resolve conflict and move forward.
- **Be mindful.** It may be helpful to engage in a mindful meditation exercise before the meeting. Turn off email and mute electronic devices to avoid distractions. Fully focusing on the conversation will convey sincerity and respect.

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*While it may seem easier to avoid a problem and hope it will go away, doing so often makes the situation worse.*

- **Be direct.** Use clear, simple language to explain why you are meeting with the employee. Avoid becoming sidetracked or going down “rabbit holes” that could distract from your message.
- **Manage your emotions.** If the other person reacts with anger, shock, or other strong emotions, remain calm. Avoid behaviors that could escalate the situation, such as becoming defensive or using sarcasm.
- **Be an active listener.** Try to listen more than you speak. If the employee brings new information into the discussion, it may be appropriate to postpone the meeting until you can reconsider the best path forward.

- **Don't rush.** The employee may need time to absorb the information.
- **Summarize the conversation.** Before closing the meeting, review what was discussed and outline any next steps. It may be helpful to provide a written summary of performance expectations, including any changes to procedures, as well as a list of relevant resources.

On rare occasions, a difficult conversation may lead to an outburst or other inappropriate behavior. If an employee becomes aggressive or threatening, inform your manager and contact HR and security.

LifeMatters is available to help you address your emotional reactions to a difficult conversation. Call 24/7/365.



*The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to assist with any management concern. Call 24/7/365.*

## How Do I Say That? Restoring Confidence

Sometimes, an employee will make a mistake that shakes their confidence. While taking the time to do a “gut check” is important, a lingering loss of confidence could turn a one-time error into a long-term problem. To help the employee restore their confidence:

**1. Consult with Human Resources.**

Explain your concerns and review any relevant policies. LifeMatters is also available to discuss ways to address the mistake and help the employee move past it.

**2. Meet privately with the employee.**

Outline your concern within the context of their work performance.



*The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can suggest options for helping an employee get back on track.*

**Sample language:** “You’ve seemed less confident in your work lately. I’m concerned this may be impacting your ability to meet individual and team goals.”

**Sample language:** “I know that making an error can be upsetting. However, I value your contributions to our workplace, and so do your colleagues.”

**3. Listen.** Give the employee time to explain their perspective. If the employee is struggling to find the right words, use active listening skills. Nodding or saying things like “go on” may assist with building rapport and creating a sense of safety.

**5. Make a plan.** Create a list of “best practices” to follow when problems occur or difficult situations arise. Arrange for the employee to receive remedial training, if necessary, and provide other helpful resources.

**4. Express confidence.** Remind the employee that everyone makes mistakes. Reiterate that you consider them a valued member of your team.

**Sample language:** “Let’s review how to handle this situation in the future.”

**6. Refer the employee to LifeMatters.** LifeMatters can suggest strategies for



*LifeMatters offers 24/7/365 assistance with management concerns. We're here to help.*

managing feelings of stress, anxiety, fear, or uncertainty. If the employee's actions violated company policy, consider making a performance referral.

**Sample language:** "LifeMatters can help you cope with workplace challenges. I recommend you call."

7. **Follow up.** Check in with the employee to see how they are adjusting and review any lingering performance concerns. If the employee is still struggling, consult with HR and LifeMatters.

## Management Consultation

Whenever you need it, as often as you need it. Reasons to call:

- Confronting an employee about performance issues
- An employee's personal problem
- Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- Establishing expectations for performance
- Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- Your own personal concerns
- Any other work-related issue

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Language assistance services in your preferred spoken and written languages are available at no cost by calling 1-800-367-7474.

