

TIPS FOR HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR MANAGER

It can be very daunting to have to speak to your manager, especially about a sensitive topic. Sometimes, it can feel like a slippery-slope, and you might worry that opening a conversation about one difficult topic will lead to another.

On the other hand, you might worry that seemingly to disagree with them or confront them about something will put you in their bad books.

Turn this potential nerve-wracking process into something stress-free by trying the following tips to communicate more effectively with your manager.

1. Schedule a separate chat

Ask your manager for a time to have a one-on-one discussion that is separate to the normal or day to day work discussions. This will ensure you aren't distracted by work tasks or feel rushed in what might be a difficult conversation.

Your goal should be to leave the conversation with solutions to help you improve the situation you're facing or overcome the roadblock in your way.

A good manager will also understand the need for privacy and discretion, so ask to have the conversation somewhere away from colleagues if you need to.

2. Get specific

Be ready to tell your manager what the problem is. Be specific about what you're going through and what you think needs to be addressed.

Ask yourself some questions beforehand that your manager might ask you so that you're well prepared to answer. Are you managing too much at home? Is there a family health problem you're dealing with? Are you struggling with a work-life balance?

A successful conversation with your manager will begin by being clear about exactly what these issues are and then working together towards a solution that works for you and your employer.

3. Come ready with an 'Ask' or to offer a solution

Just as it's important to be specific about the problem, it's also helpful to come prepared with a suggested solution. It may not be something your manager can deliver immediately, but it's a starting point for a conversation and saves time for your manager trying to guess what might assist you. Try to fill in the blanks for your manager by having a specific request that can work for you and for your employer.

Remember, staying silent gets you nowhere. If you don't ask, you'll never know and nothing will change.

4. Open the lines of communication early

It's okay if you don't know yet exactly what you're asking from your manager. Even if you're not crystal-clear on what you think will resolve the issue you're facing, you should still feel able to raise your concerns with your manager or letting them know how you're feeling about something in the workplace. But, be clear with them that this is what you're doing. It's fine to say "I don't know what the solution is yet but I wanted to put this on your radar".

Try to open it up in a spirit of collaboration and ask your manager some open-ended questions. Share your feelings and ask them for their advice, even if it means letting them think about it for a while.

It's also possible your manager won't have an immediate answer or even a perfect answer when they get back to you for a follow-up chat. But sometimes just feeling heard, acknowledged and being transparent with what you're dealing with can be enough to hit the 'reset' button and get ourselves through a difficult time.



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5. Things to do

- **Clearly state what you need.**

Your manager probably feels under pressure themselves and will want you to give them all the information they need and none they don't. Whether you're just giving them a heads-up or seeking their approval for something, clearly state what's going on and what you're asking for, and keep the commentary to a minimum.

- **Consider your manager's communication style.**

Everyone's communication preferences differ. One manager might have an open-door policy and be ready to chat at any time. Others might prefer a heads-up via email or a calendar invite. Timing is also key. Remember, they are busy too, so look for a time when they're less stressed or under pressure so they're in the best frame of mind to have the conversation with you.

- **Show your value.**

You have a unique mix of skills, experience, qualifications and personality. Remember that these are the reasons you were hired in the first place! You know your job and your opinion will be valued. Speak with confidence, deal with the facts and provide earnest and honest advice. Make reasonable suggestions and show your boss the contribution you're making to the business by trying to improve things.

- **Establish an open-line of communication.**

If you're concerned that you can't have a difficult conversation with a manager it may be that you don't have enough good conversations around which you can comfortably discuss challenges you're facing. Try to establish a regular, open line of communication built on trust and goodwill so you can have the odd difficult conversation as well.

- **Be aware of your body language.**

Project confidence. Don't slouch, hold a tall posture and avoid fidgeting or sinking into your seat. Maintain eye-contact and engage with them directly. Practice these techniques beforehand if it's something you know you struggle with.

- **Plan your time off.**

Of course you are allowed to take your annual-leave and it's a good thing, too! Taking time off work is crucial to remaining healthy and productive, but when deciding to take time off work be considerate and proactive about letting your boss know when you want to schedule leave.

Give them plenty of notice to find someone to cover for you or make arrangements for your absence.

Being considerate this way will build your reserves of goodwill with the business and your manager.

- **Empower your boss or your team.**

If your boss looks good and your team is performing well, then you look good too! Think about ways to make your team, your boss and the business look good and you will establish plenty of goodwill that will help in the long run when a difficult conversation or issue comes along.

- **Be loyal.**

Don't keep work-related secrets from your boss, especially if they're going to find out eventually anyway. If you've made a mistake, own up to it. You'll get a lot more respect and goodwill from honesty over the long run. A strong-bond with a manager or business owner is vital. Even if one or other of you moves on, you will have made a good contact that could be useful down the track later in your career.

- **Ask for advice.**

Your manager will appreciate you asking them for advice. It shows that you are open to learning, respect their opinion and are keen to work collaboratively. If you are faced with a problem or just need feedback on something you've been quietly working away on, ask your manager for their opinion. They will respect the fact that you have come to them directly and it will give them a sense of buy-in with your work and your development in the job.



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6. Things not to do

- **Don't beat around the bush.**

If you have something important to say, don't bury it under 10 minutes of commentary or irrelevant details. Start with the crux of the issue and then provide as much extra context as your manager asks you for, rather than overloading them with detail before getting to the main issue.

- **Hiding your mistakes or challenges.**

It's disloyal and unethical to hide your mistakes in the workplace. If you're experiencing difficulties or challenges, communicate these to your boss. If it's something they can fix then they will want to do whatever they can to guarantee the success of their team. If it's something extra you need in terms of support, they will want to ensure you are in the best position to succeed rather than watch you struggle.

If you inform your manager about the smaller challenges early on then you both avoid the larger issues before they develop.

- **Going to your boss when you're angry.**

You might be furious by something a colleague or even your manager themselves has said or done, but it's never a good idea to march into someone's office or fire off an angry email while you're angry or emotional. Give yourself a cooling-off period to get your emotions in check, otherwise the issue will become your anger and your reaction rather than the issue at hand.

- **Letting your boss's mood affect you.**

Does your boss run hot and cold with you and your colleagues? Don't let it get to you. There's every chance they are going through a difficult time in their home or professional lives themselves. You can't change who they are but you can control your timing. Take stock of their mood and only talk to them when they're in a good one.

- **Waiting for praise.**

You don't need a pat on the back for doing your job. Be confident in the work you're doing but ask for constructive feedback if you feel it would be helpful.

- **Taking criticism as a personal attack.**

Many people take all forms of criticism personally and believe their manager has a vendetta against them. In truth, almost every manager or business owner just wants to get the job done and get it done well. They don't have time to sit there plotting against you, and it doesn't serve their needs to either.

Criticism is a given, and when it is delivered in a constructive or helpful way it offers a chance to improve. Embrace it, move on and try to take on board the suggestions for change that will help you improve next time.

- **Throwing people under the bus**

Telling on your colleagues to make yourself seem more capable isn't a good look. People always notice and see through it too. Doing this shows you aren't a team player and can't be trusted. It's always best to work cooperatively and collaboratively with your colleagues rather than running to your boss. Your workmates will notice and appreciate this and so will your manager.

- **Being too humble**

Accept credit where it's due. It's fine to sing your own praises from time to time, especially during a performance review process or during a one-on-one conversation with your manager about how you're finding your work.



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7. Conversation Starters

There are different way to approach talking with your boss about what you're going through, depending on what type of crisis or challenge you're struggling with.

Here are a few conversation starters to help you think through how you might begin to frame a conversation with your manager.

If you're struggling financially,...

"my reduced hours are really affecting our family's income. What kind of financial support programs might our company be offering?"

"this crisis is affecting me financially. I'd like to look for additional work outside of this company, but I want to make sure it doesn't affect my work here. Can the company relax its outside-employment policy?"

"my partner recently lost their job and our family income has suffered as a result. What opportunities might there be for me to take on more work or overtime at the moment?"

If you're managing health issues,...

"I'm supporting a family member through a health issue at the moment. Could we talk about how I might adjust my schedule and workload while I work through this with them?"

"I have some health considerations that are making this a challenging time. I need to take time to look after myself as best I can. Could we talk about alternate work arrangements that might work for both me and the company?"

If you're having a hard time balancing your schedule,...

"I'm needed a lot more at home right now and I'm feeling stretched really thin. Which projects can we rethink so that I can give some additional time to my family right now?"

"I am already running at what feels like full capacity and my work/life balance is becoming harder to manage. Can we review the team's workflows to see where others might have more capacity to take new projects on?"

If you're in an emotional funk,...

"This is a really emotionally difficult time for me and I'm feeling anxious that it's affecting my work. I'm not feeling entirely like myself and I need some support to work through these issues."

"I am committed to the team and our projects but I am dealing with some emotionally taxing issues at home. I wanted to let you know what I'm going through and ask for some support while I get back on track"

Remember, your manager is a person just like you, with the same aspirations, emotions and reactions to the world around them. You can leverage this shared experience by drawing on their empathy and the goodwill within your working relationship.

Their job is to get the most out of their team and sometimes that means providing you with the support you need to be your best and provide your best work. They know this better than anyone and they will do what they can to help you through the various challenges and set backs that are a fact of life for us all.

The important thing is to approach them proactively, with sincerity and in a spirit of goodwill and cooperation so that you can work together to overcome whatever roadblocks are in your way.

