

# Dos and Don'ts of Difficult Conversations

Although they may be daunting, difficult conversations are part and parcel of any manager or leader's job. While these conversations never necessarily stop being difficult, you can take steps to make them easier. The following basic principles may help.



## Do

- **Choose a suitable time and place.** Whatever the nature of your difficult conversation, you should book a private room where you won't be interrupted, and ensure you allow sufficient time to explore both sides of the story.
- **State your intent up front.** Use your opening sentences to outline what exactly you want to talk about; including why the conversation has to happen and what you would like to see as an outcome (if appropriate). This should help

focus the conversation, and allow you to steer it back on track if need be.

- **Gather evidence and stick to the facts.** When conducting a difficult conversation, you should always rely on factual information and direct observations, and use these as specific examples to back up what you are saying whenever possible.
- **Keep the lines of communication open.** Talk to your team members informally at first, giving them an opportunity to explain things and state their side of the story.
- **Practise active listening.** Don't assume that everyone thinks like you: ensure you give the other person time to share their views without interruption, and really listen to what they are saying. Pay particular attention to non-verbal signals and body language.
- **Be clear about next steps.** In your conversation, state clearly what will happen next, including likely consequences if things don't improve (if your difficult conversation is about problem behaviour).

## Don't

- **Procrastinate.** Resist the temptation to bury your head in the sand in the hope that the need to have a difficult conversation will just go away. It is likely to make things worse.
- **Start sentences with 'you'.** For example, 'You are always late' or 'You never make deadlines' sounds like you are on the attack, and this will likely make the person you are speaking to defensive, which is not conducive to a productive conversation. Instead, criticise the behaviour, not the person, for example, 'The missed deadlines have a serious impact on our reputation.' You could also use 'we' in place of 'you'; for example, 'We need to talk about why the deadline was missed.'
- **Make assumptions or jump to conclusions.** If your difficult conversation is to address problem behaviour,

remember that there may be mitigating circumstances which explain the negative behaviour, for example illness, stress or other factors, both inside and outside the workplace. Use active listening to try to draw these factors out, while being respectful to your team member at all times.

- **Let your emotions get in the way.** Stay focused and objective, concentrating on facts and observable behaviours rather than hearsay or personal opinion.
- **Be afraid.** If informal conversations are not having the desired effect, you may need to move to more formal measures such as disciplinary action or implementation of your organisation's capability procedure. If this is the case, you may wish to speak to your own manager, or take advice from your organisation's HR department (if you have one).

**Image Credit:** Flickr [Greg Burkett](#) (accessed 06 November 2014).