

DIFFICULT AND PRODUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS

Most conversations about work and career run smoothly, however, there will be occasions when conversations will be more difficult or uncomfortable. Whether you are the supervisor or the individual team member, here are some tips for moving a conversation from difficult to productive.

1. EXPECT (AND CREATE) A POSITIVE OUTCOME:

If you expect a conversation to be difficult, you are likely projecting that through your words and non-verbal communication. Instead, prepare yourself by visualizing the conversation going well.

While you talk, find something for you both to agree on, or an easy win to move forward with.

2. DIAGNOSE FIRST:

It's important to ask questions to find the cause of the difficulty, or frustration, before moving to a solution, even if you think you already know the root of the problem. Ask open-ended questions to find a deeper understanding and avoid misunderstandings. (E.g. how, what, when, describe, tell me, etc.)

3. FOCUS ON LISTENING:

Really listen to what the other person is saying and pay attention to his/her feelings. You can even try paraphrasing what you think you heard. When people feel heard, they are more likely to be open to what others have to say.

4. BE CLEAR & CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING:

Make your requests clearly; don't expect others to be able to read your mind. For example:

- Please bring me your first draft by Monday.
- I'd like an extension until the end of the month because I want to include more input than I first planned.

Throughout the conversation you can also check for mutual understanding. For example:

- I'm sensing that you are feeling uncertain about your career at the moment, is that right?
- Let's go over this to be sure that we are both clear about the changes we've discussed.

You may not get the response you are looking for immediately; however, try to avoid repeating yourself. Some people need more time to reflect before they reach agreement. Say it clearly, check for understanding, and even if there is no agreement, move on.

5. MAKE IT ABOUT THE WORK AND BEHAVIOURS:

Talk about the difficult issues as if they were sitting on the table between you, rather than seeing the issues and the person being inextricably linked. By practicing this approach, you should experience a faster diagnosis of the difficulties and less defensiveness.

6. TAKE A BREAK:

Sometimes, solutions are not to be found in one conversation. Simply have a pleasant way of giving yourself a break. E.g. "How about we mull over what we've discussed so far and get together again tomorrow?" Or "that's a lot to think about, can I think about it and get back to you on Friday?"

7. MOVE TOWARDS A SOLUTION:

At the end of your conversation, make sure there is mutual agreement about the next steps.