

Managing Difficult Conversations

Why These Conversations Matter

Difficult conversations are discussions where emotions may run high, and the stakes feel personal – they often involve feedback, conflict, or sensitive issues like behaviour or performance. Many leaders avoid getting involved in these for fear of confrontation or getting it wrong, but avoidance can often lead to confusion, resentment, or unresolved issues.

If approached well difficult conversations can help to build clarity, trust, and accountability – strengthening relationships and driving better outcomes for both people and the business.

How to approach difficult conversations

With the right structure, you can approach difficult conversations calmly and constructively – even when emotions are involved. These HR models can help you stay grounded in facts, listen openly, and focus on moving forward.

SBI model: Sharing the Facts

By keeping focus on the facts the SBI model is useful if you're looking to remove some of the emotion from a difficult conversation. Framing discussions using the following three point system can help keep improve understanding and remain on track whilst allowing for constructive feedback.

- Situation - When and where did it happen?
- Behaviour - What exactly did they do or say?
- Impact - What was the result, consequence or effect?

EAR: Leading with Empathy

Rather than being driven by fact the EAR method gives space for leaders and employees to express their feelings and opinions and work through different viewpoints towards a position of understanding and a plan for the future.

- Empathise - Acknowledge that what you have to say might be difficult to hear
- e.g. "I appreciate this might be difficult..."
- Ask - Invite their perspective and open a discussion.
- "What's your view on this?"
- Reset - Refocus on the future
- "What could we both do to move forward?"

Some hints & tips for success

- Avoid the "feedback sandwich" (giving constructive feedback sandwiched between positive news) as it can dilute the message and lead to the employee missing they key points of the conversation. Be honest but be kind.
- Silence is OK. You don't need to fill it. Allow your employee the time and space to think before responding to your question.
- Follow up and make sure you don't let issues slide.
- Ensure you document key points after every conversation

Still need help?

If you still need help preparing for a difficult conversation, or even support during a meeting Gooding People & HR are here to guide you every step of the way. We'll tailor our services to suit your unique needs, call Becky on 01373 510020 for a free informal discussion.