



Workforce

Guide to supportive and difficult conversations

The following guide forms part of the standard for workforce policies that apply to all staff within NHSScotland regardless of which Board they are employed by.

Conducting a meeting to discuss performance, behaviour, conduct or other work related concerns is never an easy task and it is understandable that a manager and employee may have doubts and worries over such a meeting.

However, constantly putting off difficult conversations often leads to feelings of frustration, guilt, annoyance with oneself, anger, a reduction in self-confidence and ultimately more stress and anxiety.

Open, honest and unambiguous communication will be essential if the aforementioned meeting is to succeed. The skill set required to do this may seem somewhat contradictory as you may need to be both firm and gentle in your approach.

Skills which may assist include:

Information Gathering

- Make sure you have your facts straight before you begin. Know what you are going to say and why you are going to say it. Try to anticipate any questions or concerns the employee may have and think carefully about how you will answer questions.

Being Assertive

- Once you are sure that something needs to be communicated then do so in an assertive way. Do not back down or change your mind mid-conversation, unless there is a very good reason to do so.

Being Empathic

- Put yourself in the other person's shoes and think about how they will feel about what you are telling them, how would you feel if the roles were reversed? Give the employee time to ask questions and make comments.

Being Prepared to Negotiate

- Often a difficult situation requires a certain amount of negotiation, be prepared for this. When negotiating, aim for a win-win outcome, that is, some way in which all parties benefit.

Using Appropriate Verbal and Non-Verbal Language

- Speak clearly avoiding any jargon that the employee may not understand. Maintain eye contact and try to sit or stand in a relaxed way. Do not use confrontational language, or body language.

Listen

- When stressed we tend to listen less well. Try to relax and listen carefully to the views, opinions and feelings of the employee. Use clarification and reflection techniques to offer feedback and demonstrate that you were listening.

Staying Calm and Focused

- Communication becomes easier when we are calm. Take some deep breaths and try to maintain an air of calmness. Others are more likely to remain calm if you do. Keep focused on what you want to say, don't deviate or get distracted from the reason that you are communicating.

Communication skills

In terms of communication skills, you should:

1. stick to facts and avoid expressing personal opinions
2. be specific, avoiding vague, woolly statements
3. avoid generalisations, for example "you've never liked me"
4. ask open questions
5. listen actively to what is being said and take it on board
6. ensure that the tone used is friendly and not accusatory
7. use positive words such as "improvement" and "achievement", rather than negative words such as "failure" or "weakness"
8. focus the discussion on future improvement rather than on past inadequacies
9. always check for understanding, for example by asking the employee to state or summarise his or her understanding of what has been discussed

Helpful hints

Try to avoid	Try to use
You're always making mistakes	There are three mistakes in this piece of work
You tend to shout at people	I noticed at last week's meeting that you shouted somewhat aggressively at Jim when he ...
That's rubbish	I can see where you're coming from however.....
You're hopeless - you never meet your deadlines	You've missed the monthly deadline six times this year so far, on each occasion by at least two days
You're very aggressive	I appreciate that you may not realise this, but sometimes your tone and manner come across to others as aggressive. For example ...
Your work is not up to scratch. You'll have to pull your socks up	This piece of work falls short of the standard we require because ...
You're lazy. I can't ever rely on you to complete a piece of work	It has been brought to my attention that you have not completed ...
You have a lousy attitude towards the rest of the staff	What do you think you could do to improve your working relationship with your colleagues?