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Handling Difficult Conversations

A Practical Manager Guide for SMEs

Difficult conversations are an essential part of effective people management. Addressing issues promptly, fairly, and professionally can help resolve concerns early, improve performance, and reduce the risk of formal disputes.

1. Prepare

Before the meeting:

	Gather all relevant facts and evidence
	Review any previous discussions or documentation
	Be clear about the issue, desired outcome and potential next steps
	Arrange a private location free from interruptions

Remember: Never approach a difficult conversation based on assumptions, hearsay, or personal opinions.

2. Explain the Issue Clearly

Focus on facts, behaviours, and impact.

Avoid:

"Your attitude has been poor."

Instead:

"You have arrived late on four occasions this month, which has affected customer service coverage."

Keep the discussion objective and professional.



3. Listen and Understand

Encourage the employee to provide their perspective.

Useful questions:

- "Can you help me understand what happened?"
- "Is there anything impacting your ability to meet expectations?"
- "What support might help?"

Listen actively and avoid interrupting.

4. Agree a Way Forward

Discuss:

- ✓ What improvement is required
- ✓ Any support or training needed
- ✓ Timescales for improvement
- ✓ Follow-up arrangements

Ensure expectations are reasonable, measurable, and clearly understood.

5. Document and Follow Up

Following the discussion:

- ✓ Record key points and agreed actions
- ✓ Confirm any review dates
- ✓ Monitor progress consistently
- ✓ Follow through on commitments made

UK Employment Law Considerations

 **Avoid Discrimination** Ensure discussions are not influenced by a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, including age, disability, race, religion, sex, pregnancy, marriage/civil partnership, gender reassignment, or sexual orientation.

 **Consider Reasonable Adjustments** Where an employee may have a disability, consider whether reasonable adjustments are required before addressing performance or attendance concerns.

 **Follow Company Procedures** Use your disciplinary, capability, sickness absence, and grievance procedures consistently.

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 **Be Consistent** Treat similar situations in a similar manner to reduce the risk of unfair treatment allegations.

 **Keep Records** Accurate meeting notes may be critical if concerns later progress to a formal process.

 **Do Not Predetermine Outcomes** If concerns could lead to formal action, remain open-minded and allow the employee the opportunity to respond.

 **Know When a Conversation Becomes Formal** An informal conversation can remain supportive and developmental. However, where disciplinary sanctions or a performance improvement plan may be considered, a formal process should be followed in line with company policy and the ACAS Code of Practice.

Common Manager Mistakes

-  Ignoring issues until they escalate
-  Becoming emotional or defensive
-  Making assumptions
-  Talking more than listening
-  Failing to agree clear actions
-  Inconsistent treatment of employees
-  Not keeping records

Manager Checklist

- ☐ Prepare facts and examples
- ☐ Hold the meeting privately
- ☐ Explain concerns clearly
- ☐ Listen to the employee's perspective
- ☐ Consider any mitigating circumstances
- ☐ Agree actions and support
- ☐ Set review dates
- ☐ Keep written notes
- ☐ Follow up as agreed

Key Takeaway

Handle difficult conversations early, focus on facts rather than opinions, listen actively, and agree clear actions. A well-managed conversation often prevents a minor issue becoming a formal HR matter.