
13 Ways Managers Can Initiate Tough Conversations With Employees

Confrontation is never pleasant. But as a manager, it's a crucial part of the job. Sugarcoating or avoiding the problem altogether will only make things worse — not just for your team, but for your employee's development too.

There are a number of ways to make these conversations less difficult so you and your report can come to effective solutions together. We asked 13 members of [Forbes Coaches Council](#) what those best practices are.

1. Don't Sugarcoat The Message

We often sugarcoat our difficult conversations, which just dulls the message and robs the employee of an opportunity to grow and improve on skills and potential. Instead, share what didn't work and why, make a clear request on what you'd like the employee to do differently, and get perspective to align on clear next steps. - [Aaron Levy, Raise The Bar](#)

2. Use A Simple Formula

People rise or lower to the level of performance that is expected of them. Remove any chance that you might convey limiting beliefs about your employee by using a simple formula. State the facts you observed (and not the story you made up about those facts); state the impacts on the work, other employees, etc., make a clear request and let them know this request is because you see their potential. - [Maureen Cunningham, Up Until Now Inc.](#)

3. Create A Feedback Culture

Difficult conversations, whether at home or at work, tend to be avoided because confrontation is not fun. But if we build a culture of feedback, then we can open the door for otherwise challenging conversations to become normative. When organizations embrace this, staff understand that feedback isn't an attack, but an opportunity for ongoing improvement. - [Billy Williams, Archegos](#)

4. Focus On The Betterment Of The Team

Be selfless: In performance conversations, focus on the betterment of the team and remove personal attachments. Be structured: Have a fact-based, considerate, and positive first conversation. Be sure to listen, explain the "why," and ask for insights. Be sustainable: Instead of being controlling, be collaborative. Allow the employee to help create a positive action plan to improve their performance. - [Erin Urban, UPPSolutions, LLC](#)

5. Be Human First

Yes, you're a manager, and that requires you to ensure work gets done. But before you were a manager, you were a human. Surprise! You still are. Begin a tough conversation with your human side. "I'm noticing gaps in your work. Are you OK?" goes a long way toward discovering real reasons behind lagging performance. Ask and listen like a person, and you'll learn more than you expected. - [Darcy Eikenberg, Red Cape Revolution](#)

6. Establish Trust

Establishing trust with employees before difficult conversations are necessary and it helps to ease these conversations. When in conversation, create a safe environment so that the employee feels free to discuss what is really going on. Remind the employee that it's your job to help them succeed. Help the employee identify concrete next steps and agree on how you'll track progress. Keep it short. - [Barbara OMalley, Exec Advance](#)

7. Come From A Positive Place

When it comes to having difficult conversations, like giving negative feedback, we tend to obsess over what to say. But more important than the words you choose is how you deliver them. Your energy is everything. Emotions are contagious. So if you're angry or judgemental, your employee will feel that and not hear your perfectly delivered, constructive feedback. Mind your emotions. - [Stella Grizont, WOOPAAH](#)

8. Confront Behaviors, Not Attributions

Before starting the conversation, think about the facts. Think about what a camera would record the person doing; something that you want them to change. Don't think about your evaluation of it. "You need to improve your performance" will be difficult and unsuccessful, but, "Your last three deliverables were late, what can you do to correct that?" has a much higher success rate. If you can't name the behavior(s), then you're not ready to confront. - [Bill Gardner, Noetic Outcomes Consulting, LLC](#)

9. Try Empathetic Honesty

It is extremely important to be empathetically honest. Consider why they are acting the way they are or doing the things they are. If possible, find ways to address their wrongdoing without condemning or shaming them. When we meet people where they are at, they will be much more receptive to correction. - [Ryan Miller, Ryan James Miller](#)

10. Lean Into The Conversation

Find a private setting where you can confidently focus and lean into the conversation. When giving employees feedback, providing a clear timeline and criteria to improve helps them own their performance. Have a two-way conversation and create space to hear barriers, challenges or additional resources needed to be successful. Offer to stay in contact with regular check-ins to address the steps together [Meredith Moore Crosby](#) [Leverette Weekes](#)

11. Have Conversations More Often

It's never easy to share difficult information, but if you've developed a rapport with your direct report, it can make the conversation easier. I created a "How I Like to Be Coached" form that I share with new members to learn how they like to communicate and use it to goal set. Set regular one-on-one conversations with each of your team members so communication on a regular basis is less awkward. - [Joyel Crawford, Crawford Leadership Strategies, LLC](#).

12. Care For What They Care About

All employees go to work every day for a specific reason. We all have people in our lives who inspire us to work hard, to wake up early in the morning, endure the rush-hour traffic, deal with our boss and clients, etc. Great managers build strong relationships with their employees on a close, personal and family-oriented level, allowing them to be more effective during difficult conversations. - [Nader Mowlae, Career Recovery Academy](#)

13. Collaborate Instead Of Confront

Rather than telling the employee how to improve performance, ask the employee how they could improve performance. If the employee avoids addressing the real issues, ask further questions that narrow the range of the discussion and actions. It's always better for the employee to identify the problems and produce the solutions than to be told what the problems and solutions are. - [Steven Maranville, Maranville Enterprises](#)