



How to address sensitive topics at work

Managers are often reluctant to address performance, sensitive personal issues or behavioural problems with employees due to anxieties about overly emotional reactions, making the situation worse, and the manager's own discomfort. But from a productivity standpoint, the sooner a problem is confronted, the sooner it can be resolved. Therefore, learning how to effectively handle difficult conversations is an important skill for any manager.

Be prepared

The first step to addressing a sensitive topic at work is to have the relevant facts and information at your fingertips. Connect with your HR representative to ensure you fully understand company policies and procedures, your rights and the employee's rights.

Here are some helpful tips to help you prepare:

- **Deciding on a location.** You need to be able to have an open, frank, one-to-one conversation in private without interruptions. Make sure the conversation is in-person, NOT by telephone or email.
- **Allocate enough time.** You don't want to appear rushed. Give yourself and your employee some breathing space after the meeting to refocus.
- **Contacting your Employee and Family Assistance Program.** Dealing with sensitive employee and workplace situations can challenge you as a people leader. Let your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) help with confidential and professional guidance for any situation you may be faced with.

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- **Planning your conversation.** Jot down notes and key points to help you cover all relevant points and remain focussed.

The conversation

The goal of your conversation is for you and the employee to agree on a plan of action to help address the problem. It gives you the chance to fully understand what might be going on and gives the employee the chance to seek support or voice concerns. However, if the employee is resistant or defensive, your internal policies and procedures for handling discipline matters and grievances will provide you with a framework for any action you intend to take.

During the conversation be sure to:

- **Remain calm and focussed.** Concentrate on the issue or behaviour and not the person and remain objective and non-judgemental.
- **Be positive.** If this is the first time you are bringing up the topic to an individual, try to be positive. State your concern and then explain that your feedback is meant to help them improve and succeed.
- **Practise active listening.**
 - Make eye contact and watch your body language. Lean toward the other person and avoid folding your arms as this signals that you are not listening.
 - Do not interrupt.
 - Ask questions to clarify the situation. Avoid closed yes-or-no questions that tend to shut down conversation. Instead, paraphrase what the employee has said. For example, "In other words, what you are saying is...".
 - Acknowledge the employee's perspective.
- **Manage the meeting.** This means *you* direct the conversation and decide if and when tactics are working. You also decide if an adjournment or break is needed.
- **Involve the employee.** Together, agree to a plan of action and schedule a follow up meeting.

Follow up

Even if the employee has been successful in changing his or her behaviour or improving performance, a follow up conversation is important. Tell the employee that you appreciate his or her efforts and ask if any further support from you is required. If the situation has not improved, you need to have a formal discussion with the employee regarding company policies and procedures and the consequences of his or her continued behaviour or poor performance.

No one looks forward to having a difficult conversation with someone who works for them, but if the discussion is handled in the right way, it can not only lead to better performance or relationships for the employee, but for your whole team.

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Managing millennials

For more than four decades the Baby Boomers, the largest generation in history, ruled the workplace, naturally, organizational programs and strategies revolved around their needs. Now in their late 50s and 60s, the Boomers are beginning to leave the workforce, only to be replaced by another enormous demographic society – the Millennials.

These children of the Baby Boomers were born between around 1980 and 2000. As a group, the Millennials are more affluent, more technologically-adept, more educated and more ethnically diverse than any previous generation. By 2020, millennials will make up at least 50 percent of employees in countries around the world. Their potential is enormous and their values, expectations, and ways of communicating are unique. To harness their many talents and abilities, organizations and leaders need to understand what motivates and engages this positive, confident and energetic group.

Motivating millennials

Strategies and programs that worked for Baby Boomers are not as effective with Millennials. Organizations and managers need a different approach to understand and optimize the potential of this generation.

Here are tips to get you started:

- **Listening.** Millennials are going to question leaders and management. This is not out of disrespect. Instead of getting annoyed or issuing orders, have a conversation. Most of the time, younger employees are just seeking more information or trying to understand their role in the overall corporate strategy.
- **Providing challenging work.** Millennials want to learn and contribute. They are also great multitaskers and problem-solvers. Without variety and challenges, they are likely to become bored and seek positions elsewhere.
- **Encouraging teamwork.** This is a generation that is changing how work gets done. They are the first generation to grow up immersed in social media, so they are comfortable sharing and accessing information, communicating and collaborating across a variety of platforms. This can be advantageous for managers as they can mentor, coach, and train their Millennials as a team.
- **Giving recognition.** The Millennials have spent a lifetime being told they are unique and special. They not only want recognition for their work, they expect it. Managers should also consider framing any criticism or feedback as learning opportunities and providing guidance as to exactly how their Millennial employees can improve.

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- **Fostering work-life balance.** Younger employees value their careers, but home, family, friends, community activities, and personal pursuits are equally important to them. As a result, they seek work-life balance. They will get the job done but not by spending 60 or 70 hours at the office like their parents. Allow them some autonomy and flexibility in how the job gets done.
- **Promoting corporate social responsibility.** Millennials are concerned about social issues and look for employers who support philanthropic causes. Consider integrating team-building events around your organizations corporate social responsibility program – such as charity walks, food drives, fundraisers, and community clean ups.
- **Communicating like a Millennial.** This is a generation that grew up communicating electronically and likes instant two-way, 24/7 communication across many platforms. Many organizations are including interactive company-wide and/or team portals, mobile apps, YouTube, Skype, Flickr, Facebook, to engage their Millennial employees and customers. Millennials also used to accessing information visually through YouTube and other sites, so incorporating images and videos in both internal and external communications can be effective.

Millennials seek leadership, even structure, from their managers, but also expect to be mentored and respected. Like the Baby Boomers before them, the Millennials bring tremendous opportunities – and challenges – to organizations. By understanding their views and values and respecting their talents and potential, you can help develop the workforce of the future.

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