

# A guide to difficult discussions

As a leader, you may be called upon to have a difficult conversation with your team. Incidents in the workplace or community may become topics of uncomfortable discussions. You may feel your skill or confidence is lacking in leading conversations around subjects that some may call controversial, but no one has the perfect words. When you don't know what to say, instead of staying silent, admit that you don't know what to say. Tell others that you want to listen so you can learn how to address tough issues.

You may be placed in a situation where you must lead conversations about difficult topics, open dialogue and take action that creates change. Difficult conversations are important and valuable.

## **I want to have a conversation, but where do I begin?**

First, consult with your supervisor and human resources department to ensure your meeting is consistent with your organization's specific policies and procedures.

Then, start by taking ownership. Simply talking to a colleague or sending a meeting invitation to your team members for a conversation can demonstrate a commitment to taking action. Communicate that you will lead and welcome open conversations and create a safe space for discussion, whether that is in one-on-one meetings or in a team meeting.

## **Proceed with care and compassion**

Show empathy by meeting your team members "where they are." Everyone has a unique background and experiences that shape their beliefs and feelings, and each must be respected. Consider individual demographics, personalities, styles and preferences to gauge the best approach for the conversation. If you're not sure what your team members need, ask them. Some may welcome the opportunity to speak and others may not. Both perspectives are okay and should be respected.

Ask them how they are doing and what you can do to support them during challenging times. Acknowledge how difficult some experiences are and give them the space to express their feelings about such experiences. Share your own feelings.

Share your own learning journey. Describe your personal reactions and concerns. Share the path you're on. Be vulnerable and admit your feelings, including discomfort, if that's a true emotion for you.

If you don't know what to say, express that too. Let your team members know that you're struggling with the words but that you want to have the conversation. Be sure to share that what you and the team are doing is consistent with your organization's policies and procedures.

## **Confirm your commitment to safety and support**

Express your care for every team member and your personal drive to maintain a positive, accepting team environment.

## **Explain your intentions**

For now, you may only be able to offer a listening ear and a safe place for employees to share their perspectives. Or you may be asked by your organization to implement changes or new practices. Whatever your intent, be clear about it with your team.

## Ask and listen

You can't be expected to know what's on others' minds. But you'll never know what's on anyone's mind if you don't ask. Use questions to invite your team members to share their own stories, experiences, reactions, struggles, insights and perceptions.

Inquire with curiosity to understand each individual's reality. Consider using personalized, thoughtful prompts and questions. For example, instead of asking how someone is doing, you might use some of the questions below, tailored to the team or individual.

- What feelings are you experiencing?
- What has the impact been on you and your family?
- What personal experiences would you like us to hear?
- What barriers have you experienced?
- Have you noticed any obstacles in the way of your success?
- What beliefs shape how you view situations like this?
- Has this topic influenced your work experiences?
- Do you feel comfortable at work? Why or why not?
- What do you need from your leader and teammates during challenging times?
- What change would you like to see happen within our team or organization?
- What can we do better to facilitate each other's success?

## How do I act during the conversation?

**Listen.** Focus on listening and receiving what is shared. Create the space for every voice to be heard without interruption.

**Be receptive.** Avoid expressing disagreement, even if your views differ. Use verbal and non-verbal cues to express your acknowledgement and understanding of what's being shared without interrupting.

Conversational receptiveness doesn't mean abandoning your perspective, but rather showing that you are willing to engage with another's views.

**Empathize.** The more we empathize, the safer the conversation feels. Employees want leaders who leave them feeling seen and heard.

**Balance patience with a sense of urgency.** Once you've made it clear that every team member has a voice, you'll need to be realistic with them about your role in taking action. Not every need can be met, and change does not happen overnight. However, an exploration of what's possible is the key to building unity. Provide guidance about what is doable. For instance, you might say, "I can't promise I can enact these changes, but I truly do want to hear your ideas." Or "Let's explore these further with our leadership and HR team and work together on what comes next."

## What do I do after the conversation?

**Ask for feedback.** Invite your team members to let you know what they thought of your approach, how they felt the conversation went, what you might consider doing differently next time, or any ideas they have to keep the conversation going, make it better, or build on it for the future.

**Share resources.** Follow up with articles, online learning, or book recommendations to reinforce key concepts and help further the understanding and investment across the team.

## Don't stop with one conversation!

Let the team know you want to keep an open dialogue. Keep connecting and checking in with them and your coworkers.