

OMBUDSLETTER



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Difficult Conversations: listen more; talk less

Effective Communication

Effective communication is a key part of our daily interactions in the workplace. However, there are times when communication is not easy. We all find it hard at times to express how we feel about a situation. It may be in relation to the actions of a colleague whose abrasive behavior makes you uncomfortable. You want to say something but are afraid to cause offence or start an argument. It may be that your manager constantly interrupts you when you are trying to make a point. You find it frustrating but hesitate to say anything so as not to disturb the relationship. It could also be something about your own behavior that bothers people you work with. Are you open to hearing feedback from a supervisor or colleague about how working with you is affecting that person?

Are you prepared to have that difficult conversation where another person needs you to listen to feedback they have to give you?

Receiving feedback on areas where we can improve can be difficult. Try to see these difficult conversations as an opportunity to hear how other

people see us; as a chance to address some of our own blind spots about our behavior. Making the most of these opportunities can improve our relationships at work.

Once you have agreed to this difficult conversation, follow these tips to help you get the most out of the discussion:

1. Be present

Whether it is a performance management discussion or a peer exchange, it is important to be present in the moment you are having the discussion. This means the timing of the discussion is important. Make sure to plan ahead and set aside sufficient time so that the discussion is not rushed. Be sure to take care of all pending issues so that there are no distractions. Silence your phone. **Be present, focused and give the conversation your full and undivided attention.**

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2. Be open-minded

Effective communication involves expressing your views but also being receptive to the other person's views. Recognize that you may have a perspective on a situation but that others may have a different perspective. Don't believe that you are absolutely right and the other person must therefore be wrong. Be open to hearing another point of view. Be prepared to change your perspective if you get additional information. Try to put yourself in the other person's position and see the situation from their point of view. If you felt your colleague was being abrasive in interacting with you, how would you feel? Would you feel disrespected? What if your supervisor was always interrupting you? Would you consider that this person does not value your point of view; is not interested in hearing your thoughts? Being able to see the situation from the other person position can turn a difficult conversation into constructive dialogue.

3. Listen-no really listen-not just to hear but to understand

We've all had to listen to feedback we do not particularly want to hear or agree with. Many of us find it difficult to hear criticism and accept that we have areas that need improvement. Often, when we find ourselves in these situations our instinctive response is to deny, rebut and argue. We get emotional, we want to strike out and even insult the person in an attempt to defend ourselves. We focus on winning the argument and direct our mental energy and thoughts towards this outcome. If you engage in a difficult conversation with this mindset, the conversation may become a shouting match. Emotions will take over and each person will just talk, talk, talk, rather than listen to the other person. **If the problem is to be resolved, you need to find common ground.**

Finding common ground is a collaborative effort. This means you have to be prepared to listen to the other person. The next time you are having a difficult conversation, try listening more than you talk. As you listen, focus your thoughts away from your response to what is being said. Don't start to develop a rebuttal. Don't interrupt. Calm your emotions. Listen, really *listen*. Listen to the words but also to the emotions. Listen to what is being said, but also what is left unspoken. **Listen to the person's body language. Listen to how the situation has affected that person. Probe and seek for more information. Listen to understand the other person's point of view.** When you can truly understand the other person's perspective, you can experience the situation from their position and begin the journey to working together to find a solution.

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