

Managing Difficult Conversations at Work

Why This Matters

Some workplace conversations can feel more sensitive, particularly when they relate to changes in behaviour, wellbeing, or performance.

However, when handled correctly, these conversations can:

- Support employee wellbeing
- Prevent issues from escalating
- Improve performance and team morale

Spotting When to Act

Focus on observable changes, not assumptions:

- Increased absence or lateness
- Changes in behaviour or mood
- Decline in performance
- Missed deadlines or reduced productivity

✓ Stick to facts, not speculation.

Prepare Before You Speak

Good preparation leads to better outcomes:

- Gather clear examples
- Review relevant HR policies
- Choose a private setting
- Allow enough time

✓ Aim for a calm, supportive conversation, not a disciplinary confrontation.

Starting the Conversation

Keep it simple, open, and non-judgemental:

- "I've noticed a few changes recently..."
- "I just wanted to check in and see how you're doing."

✓ Focus on impact at work

✓ Show concern, not blame

If Alcohol or Substance Abuse May Be a Factor

Approach with care and professionalism:

Do:

- Focus on behaviour and performance
- Offer support and signpost help
- Follow company policy

Don't:

- Make accusations
- Attempt to diagnose
- Use judgemental language

✓ Your role is to support, not investigate.

Listen Actively

- Give them time to talk
- Ask open questions
- Show empathy
- Avoid interrupting

✓ Feeling heard builds trust and encourages openness.

Agree Clear Next Steps

- End with clarity and support:
- Outline expectations
- Agree actions or support measures
- Signpost resources (EAP, GP, OH)
- Arrange a follow-up

Create a Supportive Culture

- Promote wellbeing initiatives
- Reduce stigma around sensitive topics
- Train managers to handle conversations with confidence
- Regularly review policies and support systems

✓ A proactive, supportive culture encourages openness and helps prevent issues from escalating.

Key Takeaway

Difficult conversations don't have to be avoided.
With the right approach, managers can:

- Address issues early
- Support their people
- Build a healthier, more open workplace

Need Support?

Kestrel HR can help you:

- Train managers
- Review policies
- Handle complex employee situations
- Recruit new people

Contact Us today for a free, initial chat

Resources:

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/alcoholdrugs/resources.htm>