

COACHING IN MOTION

Be Prepared!

A four-stage checklist for addressing difficult conversations

There is a lot more to skillfully handling a difficult conversation at work than the conversation itself. Pre-work makes for a better quality of conversation and having a clear follow-up supports the change that you want to see as a result.

Here are the four steps to follow to help you have the conversation and make it a better and more productive experience on both sides.



1. Before You Agree To The Meeting

Ask yourself the question *"Am I the right person to have this conversation?"*

We can get pulled into all kinds of performance management conversations at work with people other than our direct reports. Getting drawn into delivering someone else's feedback can muddy relationships and create its own tension in the workplace. Step back and decide whether you, or someone else, are best placed to tackle this issue.



2. Prepare to Have The Conversation

There are two important ways to prepare for a challenging conversation. Firstly, do some personal reflection and secondly, get really clear on content and what you are asking for.

How to prepare yourself

Do some personal reflection on your challenges and motivation. Reflect on the following questions:

- What feels hard about this conversation, for me? Explore your beliefs around feedback.
- If you have been avoiding the conversation, think about why that is.
- Write a few notes asking yourself: "What is my best hope for how this conversation will go and what is my worst fear?"

How to prepare your content

Think about what you want to say and most importantly what behaviour changes you want the person to make. This process helps you plan for the conversation ahead:

- Make a simple list of everything you know (events, frustrations, issues, changes you want to see). Don't edit yourself too much here. Let all of it hit the page.
- When you have done this, take your points and using the Non-violent Communication approach (When X happens, I feel Y, because I need Z) transfer them to Excel. Create a column for X, Y and Z.
- This process forces you to speak from "I" and own the problem. If you can, practice saying "I" and not "you" when giving feedback.
- Add in a final column. This is for the change you want to see. Keep this focused on objective and measurable behaviour change.

3. During The Conversation

Set-up

Make sure that the space works (be it virtual or in person) and that you can't be overheard. Be mindful of meeting in glass meeting rooms and how that might affect the other person's responses.

Check-In

Remember the rule "relationship first". Don't launch straight into your prepared agenda. Make space to ask the person how they are, what is happening for them (at work and personally) and how they are feeling today.

Then Listen

You have prepared things to say and the temptation can be to blurt them all out and get this over with. That doesn't leave space for the person to reflect or for you to listen. There may be information that you are not aware of which could update your thinking.



What happens if things get heated?

Know that your nervous system, or theirs, might get activated which will lead to the conversation not being productive anymore.

Have a plan and prepare a sentence or two about pausing the conversation. Practice it so that you can say it under pressure!

For example, you could say: "I feel that we are getting off track and things are getting heated. Let's stop this conversation now and find a time to restart it at a later time."



4. Follow-Up

There is a person on the other side of the conversation, make sure to take care of them first before getting into logistics.

The most important thing here is to say thank you and offer appreciation to the person you are speaking to. That might be thanking them for listening, staying present or being open to hearing difficult feedback.

Be clear before you finish the meeting about what follow-up there will be.

- Set realistic expectations
- Be clear what will happen next and by when
- Set a date for a follow-up meeting if is needed

Don't forget to take care of yourself after the meeting. Challenging conversations can feel stressful and draining. Book in some time with a peer to debrief, go for a walk or take a break so you go back to work having processed the experience.

Would you like support to handle difficult conversations, or to help your team navigate change so you reduce them happening? Email beatrice@coaching-in-motion.co.uk for more information.

