

# HANDLING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Respectful and honest communication is critical for managing difficult situations effectively.

If you are trying to resolve a workplace issue with a colleague, or if you want to call out behaviour that is disruptive to a respectful workplace culture, your tone of voice, your body language, the things you say and the words you choose will affect the outcome.

You want the person to understand how their behaviour is impacting others, and what they can do to change.

Here are some tips:

## PLAN THE CONVERSATION:

Think about what you want to say and how you will say it ahead of time. If necessary, write yourself a script or outline, and practice it. Whilst the plan may not be exactly how the conversation unfolds, it helps you be clear about what you want to say, and it gives you a structure to use if the conversation gets side-tracked.

Include in your preparation:

- the most appropriate time and place for the conversation (to enable the best outcome)
- what you are going to say – how you will raise the topic, what questions you need to ask to understand the other person’s view, and the words you will use to describe the impact of their behaviour.

## USE ‘I’ MESSAGES:

When done correctly, ‘I’ messages show that you own your reactions and are not trying to lay the blame. They help to open the conversation, and they help the other person understand the impact of their behaviour. It can be hard to use ‘I’ messages, especially when there is a degree of emotion involved, or when you are dealing with someone in a more senior role. Be neutral in your tone and in your statements and ask open questions to get the person listening. The three steps to formulate an effective ‘I’ statement are:

- **Observation:** “I have noticed..”, “I saw..”, “When this happens..” “When you do/say...”
- **Feeling:** “I feel (explain feelings)...
- **Connection:** “...because...” (explain reason why behaviour causes these feelings – the impact on yourself and others).

## Examples:

- I’d like to see if we might reach a better understanding about \_\_\_\_\_. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well. Would it be okay to sit down and discuss it on Wednesday?
- I am talking with you because [the behaviour] is an issue that we need to address. This surprises me because generally your work is very good...
- I can see that this has been frustrating for you
- I want to make sure I understand you. You said...
- From what you’ve told me, I can see how you came to the conclusion that... However...
- I want to thank you for being open to this and taking this on board

## ASK QUESTIONS:

Take a tip from great communicators like Benjamin Franklin and Socrates. Don't criticise directly – this can put the person on the defensive, and you can wind up with a worse situation. Ask questions – in an open and neutral tone – which sow seeds of doubt in the mind of the other person. This is a much more effective than directly criticising. With this method you can criticise without causing any offence.

### Examples:

- How well do you think that meeting went?
- How do you think others reacted when you did / said ...? Why do you think they reacted that way? What impact do you think that has had on them?
- What could you have done to get a different outcome?
- How can things be changed so everyone is feeling more positive and engaged?

You can find further information about how to handle difficult conversations on the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) website. The guides and online learning courses for [managers](#) and [employees](#) are designed to help you gain the skills and confidence you need to discuss workplace issues when they arise.

The Department's Performance and Development Guidance on HRWeb can help managers provide feedback. The dedicated sections for [Public Service](#) and [Teaching Service](#) include principles, guidelines, helpful tools and suggested responses to common scenarios.

All employees can seek support and advice in preparing for difficult conversations through the Department's [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) which is strictly confidential and available 24/7. Call 1300 361 008 to make an appointment at a time and location that suits you.

Managers can also contact the EAP's dedicated **Manager Assist** telephone advisory service during business hours on 1300 361 008 for management support and coaching.