



Difficult Conversations in the Workplace

Jacob's supervisor seems to consistently give him urgent work the last 30 minutes of his day that "has to be done before he goes home." Jacob has frustration building, but he doesn't know what to say or how to negotiate the workload. How should he approach this situation? Eric, his supervisor, is a bit manipulative and "makes Jacob feel guilty" for wanting to leave on time.



Sarah is a manager and works in a clinic that collaborates schedules and vacation times on a rotational/courtesy basis. However, Denise seems to grab the best days before anyone else can comment on the future possibilities of scheduling. The staff is looking to Sarah to say something to Denise, but Sarah struggles with Denise's defensiveness. Where does she begin with this conversation?

Robert was promoted to a supervisor position over one of his buddies, Chris, this last year. It's time for Robert to do the annual evaluation for his former peer. It's not going to be that positive because Chris has had some resentment and attitude issues since he didn't get the promotion. How does Robert professionally and realistically approach the evaluation discussion with Chris?

I think you can see where we are going with the discussion here. Frequently, there are opportunities to say something to a co-worker or client that can be awkward, lead to conflict, or at the very least be misunderstood. So it takes forethought, a good attitude, and professional assertion to navigate through a complicated dialogue.

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The three extreme responses when a conversation is necessary are 1) saying nothing at all 2) consistently dumping on someone else, and 3) tactlessly blurting out whatever comes out in the name of honesty!

Of course, the professionally mature and classy way of handling awkward and difficult conversations is to speak up in a timely fashion, but in the right way.

I like to refer to these three styles of communication as **Clamming Up, Blowing Up, or Speaking Up.**

What is your style of engaging in those tough, but necessary verbal exercises at work?

I find, by far, the most common style is Clamming Up and saying nothing at all. Other than the type A's that have what I call inner jalapeño, most workers take the softer road of not making any waves. The only problem with that, of course, is that nothing ever gets resolved, resentment builds, and professional relationships are distanced, thus affecting the work flow, efficiency, and morale of the office.

And if you are in a leadership role, it's even more necessary to engage in difficult discussions because it keeps the environment of your office a place where

respect and trust is modeled, not to mention the fact that your staff's confidence in your ability relies on how you verbally navigate the hard scenarios.

Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

I suggest three points in mentally and verbally preparing for an awkward discussion:

1. Personally clarify the goal or motivation of your discussion

Is what you are going to discuss an issue that definitely needs to be aired and addressed or are you just talking about a personal preference or annoyance? For example, is this discussion necessary to affect a positive change in the workplace and the overall attitude of the team or are you simply venting about personal peeves you don't agree with? What is best for the organization and office morale in this situation?

I find that if you can let common differences and irritations go, and feel good about it, that's optimal. However, if you find yourself getting resentful and avoiding the individual you need to speak with, it's time to talk.



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2. Write the opening sentence of the conversation down or have it memorized as well as an outline of where you want the discussion to go

Having a script is so helpful, especially if you are dealing with a hot head or someone highly defensive and insecure. A script or outline can keep you on track and prevent your thoughts from becoming mush and your words from becoming tongue tied.

3. Timing is everything

Take into consideration what the person is going through personally (if you know), or if they are overwhelmed with workload or even ready for a difficult discussion. Remember you've had time to plan and think about it for a while. Some suggest that an appointment could be set ahead of time

for those who need time to process and are not quick on their feet, so they too can emotionally and mentally prepare.

What to Say in a Difficult Conversation

Most people know when it's time to talk, but the problem comes when it's time to figuratively "pull the trigger" and face the discussion head on. When I ask those why they wait and what's holding them back, they say things like, I've tried to talk about it before and they blamed me, or, I was told I was just being too sensitive, or, they got defensive and said they didn't know what I was talking about.

I recommend a four step conversation model called **D.E.S.C.** that leaves no room for misunderstanding, is clear, concise, and professional.

The D.E.S.C. Model

Describe the situation

Express your feelings about the situation

Specify what you want to change in the situation

Consequences associated with the behavior, good or bad

The illustration I'll use for a sampling of the **D.E.S.C. Model** is a frustrated worker that has discussed with their co-worker in the past the need to come to them directly with their concerns rather than go over their head to their supervisor to complain:

Describe the Situation:

"We agreed two weeks ago that if you had a question about a procedure or policy, you would come to me directly and not go over my head with the complaint. Our supervisor just told me you were in his office again with complaints about my work."

Express your feelings:

"I'm frustrated because I feel that I'm not trusted by you and our agreement has been violated."

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Specify what you want:

“I want you to have the freedom to talk to me personally the next time you have a concern because I’m open to your feedback.”

Consequences explained regarding the outcome:

Positive Consequence:

“In the future, if you bring your concerns to me first, I will take it seriously and it will build more of a sense of trust and teamwork between us in our work relationship.”

Negative Consequence:

“If you don’t feel the freedom to talk to me personally about your concerns next time, I will request a meeting with the both of us and our supervisor, so we can come up with a more agreeable plan.”

Knowing that a difficult conversation has to happen can create undue anxiety and stress if you don’t know what to say or how to approach the subject matter. However, true professionalism and personal growth require that we have the ability to verbally engage when necessary.

Believe me, the benefits far outweigh the difficulty if done right!

If you want more information on this topic, check out Workshop Track #2 on our website: *Blowing Up, Clamming Up, or Speaking Up in the Workplace*.

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Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture’s needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill’s strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.