

# HOW THE **BEST MANAGERS** ALWAYS HAVE **GOOD CONVERSATIONS**

The CMP Guide to handling difficult conversations and defusing conflict.





# cmpresolutions

*Working with employers to get the best out  
of managers since 1989*

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## Introduction

There are always going to be difficult conversations in the workplace. They are part of the mechanics of getting work done, improving people's performance, an important starting point for change and innovation.

But it matters how those conversations are handled. There are 'bad' difficult conversations and 'good' ones - making the difference between a smooth-running machinery of productive relationships and smart decision-making; and on the side, a stuttering contraption of people out of sync, diverted energies and disruption for the entire operation.

Managers most often get it wrong by:

- assuming they know what's happened and needs to be done before even having the conversation;
- trying to impose a right/wrong outcome;
- only wanting to know about facts, and not being prepared to talk about feelings;
- believing that when other people have problems it's due to them and their personality rather than factors out of their control.

## What makes conversations difficult

At the root of all manager conversations about work is an unavoidable tension: the need to deal with problems and get tasks completed on one side; and on the other, the need to sustain relationships with people.

It's a tension that leads to problems for the whole organisation.



## The Risks

### ▶ Being 'nice'

By being sensitive to the impact of their words on relationships, managers can be regarded as 'easy-going', but also as 'a soft-touch' and ineffectual. It's a challenge deferred. While it feels to the manager like they are acting in everyone's best interests, there are going to be occasions when they need to be firm they're not taken seriously, and a new brand of severity is taken badly.

- Things don't get done, and staff begin to expect the manager to make everything smooth and easy for them;
- Burn-out for the manager from taking on additional workload and responsibility for solving everyone's problems;
- Weak management skills that limits the manager's career.

### ▶ Being 'nasty'

Managers who might also be described as aggressive, tough, bullying, directive and self-centred. An attractive option, because it means getting the job done and moving on. But what about the long-term workplace environment and relationships?

- There's compliance from the member of the team, but not commitment. Engagement slips away and a sense of grievance builds.
- People are more likely to keep information, ideas and issues to themselves. The manager doesn't see the full picture, meaning planning and decision-making suffers. Creativity and participation goes in to decline.
- The manager gets a reputation as being abrasive and lacking in interpersonal deftness, hampering their career development and that of others around them.



## Doing nothing

When we're busy, it can look and feel the best option to leave problems to one side. Why have difficult conversations when the situation might work itself out? Managers who act this way will eventually be seen as unavailable, aloof, unappreciative, unreliable and ineffectual.

- Bad behaviour and poor performance go unchallenged and become the norm;
- The gap in management is filled by unofficial 'sub-managers' who undermine the manager and make their own decisions;
- The manager begins to doubt their own value and purpose.

## Having good 'difficult' conversations

Any conversation can be made constructive, balancing what needs doing with relationships. It takes a commitment in a manager to some particular qualities and skills.

### 1. Always being the adult

All conversations need to be based on honesty. Managers need to always feel able to express and be open about both their thoughts and feelings. They need to have a sense of benevolence - to genuinely want the best for the organisation and other individuals as well as themselves. And courage - essentially - to be willing to initiate sometimes awkward situations, to speak honestly and be vulnerable personally for the sake of dealing with situations that are harming other people.

### 2. Facing up to difficult conversations

Managers need to decide actively that a conversation is needed - not bounced into it by circumstances or emotions. They should plan what they want to accomplish: 'what do I need to talk about? what do I really want for myself, for them, for the relationship?'. And set out a clear purpose with benefits for both sides: if a conversation feels risky to a manager, it will be feeling risky to the other person too.

### 3. Not relying on assumptions

Senior staff can be tripped up by believing their experience means they already have the answers. They need to ask exploratory questions and show a meaningful interest in what an employee thinks, believes, fears and wants. Curiosity - letting people know they have been heard and understood - is a really strong working relationship building tool. It also gives managers the deeper



information needed to help with the problem-solving. Managers need to be able to recognise their version of events is a mix of fact, fiction and assumptions, and separate what they know, believe, and what's uncertain, before they open their mouth.

#### **4. Getting involved**

When managers are tight-lipped, looking only to protect their position, the employees around them will do the same. In other words, when there is a problem, managers need to avoid appearing detached and superior, making the issue only about the employee. They should be asking themselves: "how might I have contributed to this situation?" Talking about their contribution immediately opens up a dialogue and makes the member of the team more likely to be open, constructive and listen to what's being said.

#### **5. Doing more of it**

Businesses want action and efficiency without debate. But conversations only improve through being a natural and regular part of working lives, not as an event - being summoned to a meeting, or into a weekly team slot. Frequent, open and trusting conversations need to be part of the culture, encouraged and supported. Managers should be making sure there are consistent messages about open conversations, the support and development available, putting more time and resources into supporting people away from escalating their negative feelings, and towards dialogue with each other.

## What next?

CMP supports employers to develop people managers, who bring their whole-self to work and have the skills required to manage every situation, including inappropriate behaviour, poor performance and organisational change.

For more information on how CMP can support you in creating a culture of Clear Air™, please visit our website, or talk to us for free, confidential advice.

## About CMP Resolutions

For 29 years, CMP has been the UK's leading independent provider of workplace relationship management and dispute resolution services and training.

Our ambition is to create workplaces where people can really be authentic, bringing their whole-self to work.

We call these Clear Air™ workplaces; places where there are no inhibitors to speaking up, expressing opinions, and challenging the status quo. Where ideas can be shared and challenged without fear of reprisal, where teams have trusting relationships, and can appreciate and respect individual differences and opinions. We know that this leads to employees who are happier at work and more engaged with their organisation.

CMP promote Clear Air™ by supporting the development of Conversational Intelligence™ the interpersonal soft skills needed to harness the differences between us all.

These soft skills to empower individuals to work together more effectively whilst improving innovation and problem solving, whilst preventing the negative consequences of relationship breakdown.

For nearly 30 years, CMP has offered world class Professional Services, such as coaching, investigation, mediation and team development, Consultancy Services, such as policy and process review and development, and Training in managing workplace relationships. These are available to every layer of an organisation, and delivered at all levels of complexity.

**Some of our clients:**



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