

# Managing difficult conversations



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# Introduction

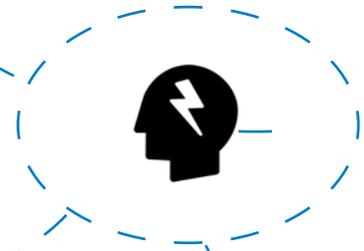
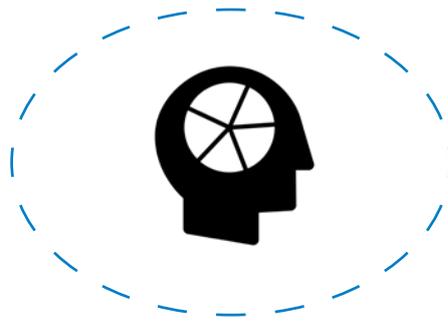
**As someone who manages people, you have to resolve complex situations every day. This often involves having tough conversations – conversations that must be handled carefully if you are to find a way through that works for the business, the colleague concerned and your team.**

The problem may revolve around bullying (or being bullied), unacceptable behaviour or poor work performance, or could be triggered by your concern for someone's wellbeing, either way you will need to get to the root of it and find a fair and sensible solution.

Managers tell us that the conversations they find most challenging are those with angry, distressed or uncommunicative employees; when the subject matter is embarrassing; or when the conversation may cause the person distress. They also say that conversations can be tougher still when the person involved may have a mental health condition or other disability.

This short guide is designed to make managers feel confident, competent and comfortable when the time comes to have that difficult conversation.

To make the best use of the Managing difficult conversations guide, you might want to flip through it to refresh your memory, ideally, a day or two before you sit down with your employee.



This guide will help you to:

- Know when the time has come to act.
- Get the basics right, no matter what has triggered the conversation.
- Improve your listening and feedback skills.
- Establish a rapport during a conversation.
- Handle tough conversations:
  - i) When someone is angry or distressed.
  - ii) When a person is unresponsive.
  - iii) When you think an employee may have a mental health condition or other disability.
  - iv) When you need to address unacceptable behaviour or under-performance.
  - v) When you need to seek more advice and support, including what to do if you suspect a person may be suicidal.



# When to act

**Some employees will approach you for help when they have a problem, but many will not. Good managers should know when something is wrong or going wrong. And you are more likely to nip the problem in the bud, helping both the individual and the organisation as a whole, if you spot problems early and act immediately.**

There are many signs that a colleague may be experiencing difficulties at work or at home. These include:

- Behaviour that is out of character or even disruptive.
- Poor hygiene.
- Visible emotion or distress.
- Depression.
- Anxiety.
- Poor and/or unpredictable performance.
- A sudden drop in productivity.
- Poor timekeeping or absenteeism.
- Malicious gossip.
- Withdrawal from others.
- Being quiet when normally talkative.
- Irritability.
- Increased use of drugs, alcohol, coffee or cigarettes.
- Poor judgment and decision-making.
- Tiredness and low energy.



## Fearful of taking action?

**Conversations with an angry, distressed or uncommunicative employee can be challenging – and it may be tempting to avoid them. Don't – a situation may run out of control if you do not act promptly.**

If you are anxious about an upcoming meeting, ask yourself what you need to overcome to have this difficult conversation?

- Do you have a fear of conflict?
- Do you worry that you too might become angry or upset?
- Do you fear that the conversation will unearth a bigger problem that you may struggle to deal with?
- Do you worry that you will be embarrassed by the employee's personal revelations?

Such anxiety is understandable – it is always difficult dealing with heightened emotions – but as a manager it is your responsibility to manage. Once you have begun the conversation, your fears will be allayed if you:

- Remain calm and present an open front, encouraging the person to talk freely and honestly.
- Keep your own emotions under control, though you must show empathy.
- Don't shy away from asking difficult questions.
- Keep control of the conversation.

Such conversations may prove useful in alerting you to your own difficulties with, say, conflict or anger. In the longer term, if you address your problems, you will become a better manager.

# Getting the basics right

**A good manager is an expert communicator, able to deal with any difficult situation. The key to concluding such conversations successfully is to focus on the problem, not the person and to find a solution to the problem together.**

**Regardless of the specific situation, some basic principles apply to handling every potentially difficult conversation.**

## **Before the conversation**

- When you become aware that an employee seems to have a problem – don't ignore it.
- If the problem does not require immediate action, watch what's happening over time to see if a pattern emerges – don't jump to conclusions.
- Sleep on a problem – a situation can appear very different when the heat has died down.
- Keep an open mind – people lead complicated lives and there could be many explanations for their behaviour. Do they care for an elderly relative? Do they have a childcare problem?
- Do your homework – make sure you have the facts to hand.
- Think through a few potential solutions in advance so that together you can explore positive options.



**...and**

## **The way you say it matters**

- ▶ **Use “and” rather than “but”:** “I know you worked all night and you want to do well and I could have been clearer in my direction ...” or “We need you to come in on time and get on with your colleagues.” The use of “but” is negative and can erase what has been said previously: “I like that but ...” actually means, “I don’t like that.” “You did a good job but ...” is heard as “You didn’t do a good job.”
- ▶ **Use “I” statements to show that you are taking responsibility and to help you focus on the problem at hand and not the person. To help the person understand why you need to address the situation, say: “I am concerned because ...”; not: ‘You are hopeless and underperforming.’**

- Developing a preferred outcome – such as an agreement about extra support or coaching – may help.
- But don’t rehearse – following a script will hamper your ability to listen and react accordingly.
- Choose a private place, at a convenient time for the other person, to meet so you can talk openly and honestly.

### **During the conversation**

- Treat the situation with the seriousness it deserves – if it is enough to trigger the conversation, it must be important.
- Reassure the person that the content of the conversation is confidential.

- Don't allow difficult conversations to turn toxic by becoming combative. Do not say: "You have a problem;" say: "We have a problem – let's solve it together."
- State the issues clearly to avoid misunderstanding and explain factually why the conversation is necessary.
- Listen to the person – never assume that you know what is going on.
- Talk to the person as an adult – do not patronise them.
- Appear business-like and confident; sit up straight; and talk calmly. Let them know you are listening; don't allow telephone calls or colleagues to interrupt.
- Show your concern for the individual – say: "I'm sorry to hear that" or "That must have been difficult for you."
- If you don't understand what they are saying, ask them to give concrete examples or to say it again, perhaps in a slightly different way.
- Don't interrupt or finish their sentences.
- Use direct, simple language; don't 'pussyfoot' around – say what you need to say and say it clearly.
- If you feel your message isn't getting through, say it again but in a different way.
- Don't be afraid of silence; allow the person time to listen, think – and then talk.

## **Following the conversation**

- Giving prompt feedback after a meeting prevents a bad situation from getting worse.
- Always give this feedback based on the specific behaviour you would like to see improved; don't ask people to change what they cannot change – such as their personality.
- Send a written summary of what was agreed at the meeting and check that the person shares your understanding.
- Do what you've promised to do.
- Arrange a further meeting to review the progress made.

# How to listen and give feedback



## **Listen, think, respond**

It is impossible to do all three at once. Take your time – listen to what the person is telling you, think about what to say and respond. A hasty, ill-considered response to an angry or distressed colleague risks exacerbating an already difficult situation.

**Knowing how to listen and give skilled, helpful feedback will help both of you to find solutions to seemingly intractable problems. By encouraging the person to have their say and then working together, the best managers can guide tough conversations towards a successful outcome.**

## Do ▶

- Treat the person as you would like to be treated yourself.
- Attempt to solve problems together – don't impose solutions.
- Summarise what they said to make sure you heard it correctly, asking open questions that help you to understand and begin to solve the problem. Say: "What I'm hearing is ..." or "So, what you mean is ..."
- Ask questions to clarify particular points: "What do you mean when you say ...?" or "Is this what you mean?"
- Repeat what they have told you, asking: "Have I heard this correctly?"
- Use body language and gestures to convey your attention – nod occasionally to show your interest.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with, for example, small verbal comments such as "yes" and "okay".
- Respond positively, openly and honestly – active listening is designed to generate respect and understanding, helping you to gain information and perspective.
- Assert contrary opinions respectfully. Say: "That's interesting and important, though it's not how your colleagues see it."
- Limit your feedback to what you and the individual can actually do something about.
- Thank the person for sharing their perspective, for being so honest and for helping you to understand.
- Ask about the impact any medical issue raised may have on the person's work and any needs or adjustments this may require.
- Be sensitive and willing to pause or offer sympathy if the person becomes distressed.
- Don't be frightened of silence – having time to think is important.

## Don't ▶

- Say: "I don't believe it," "You're having me on," or "You're joking."
- Focus on, or simply blame, the person – concentrate on the specific problem or behaviour at issue and look at it in context.
- Make judgments.
- Interrupt with counter-arguments – this frustrates the speaker and will make it harder to understand what they are really trying to say.
- Ask for confidential details of a person's medical condition.

Now you have listened and given feedback, it is time to agree what needs to be done. Ideally, this should be an agreed written plan that works in the interests of both the individual and the organisation. If you can find common ground, you can then move on to solving the problem together. Take great care with your words and arrive at a common understanding of the problem.



### Ask the person

- How can we take this forward?
- What will they do differently?
- How do they envisage the situation being resolved?
- What help do they need from their colleagues?
- What can we do for them that will make their life at work easier?
- When shall we meet again to review progress?

### There will be times, however, when an agreement cannot be found.

- Say you need more time to look into the problem.
- You may need to talk to other people involved.
- Seek the advice of your manager.
- Set up another meeting to discuss the situation.
- You may need to suggest the person seeks professional help – but don't assume they always will.



# Giving feedback

Feedback can be both positive and negative but must always be factual and constructive. Positive feedback – telling a person they’ve done well and spreading good news – is the easier of the two. Giving negative feedback can be difficult for the manager and distressing for the employee. However, no matter how reluctant you are to break the bad news, a problem will persist –and could become more serious – if you do not act promptly. And, remember that the aim of offering feedback is not to agitate the employee but to improve the situation.

## Top 20 rules of feedback

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1. Prepare – have concrete examples of the problem and be clear about what you want to say before you say it. Make yourself aware of any relevant organisational policies and procedures, and sources of support and advice.
2. Don't stockpile problems – the right moment may never arrive.
3. Don't send an email to avoid confrontation – give feedback in person.
4. Don't delay – negative feedback is less likely to be effective if a problem is allowed to fester.
5. Start with an honest compliment.
6. Put yourself into the other person's shoes.
7. Raise specific problems.
8. Listen and pay attention – look at the situation from the other person's view.
9. Uncover the root of the problem.
10. Don't assume that you know the causes of the problem and jump to conclusions.
11. Don't criticise the person – it is their behaviour or performance that is at issue.
12. Don't issue threats – this will back the person into a corner and, likely as not, inflame the situation.
13. Move beyond discussing past incidents to working out what can be done to improve the situation.
14. Don't generalise about problems with behaviour or performance, and especially do not use words such as “all,” “never” or “always.”
15. Balance your feedback – positive feedback builds confidence and reinforces the behavior you want to see; give negative feedback factually with suggestions for improvement.
16. Take a joint approach to solving the problem. When you have given your feedback, ask: “What can we do about it?”
17. Help the person to change their behaviour.
18. Ask questions that take you towards a solution, such as: “How could we have done better?”
19. Be willing to accept feedback yourself.
20. Don't leave the person feeling humiliated or resentful – if you do, they will be reluctant to change.

# Handling tough conversations



## Dealing with anger and distress

**Remember, always try to manage anger face to face, not by email, letter or voicemail. This requires courage but it is what good managers do. You may need to deal with anger in the wake of an incident in the workplace or with anger that flares during the course of a conversation.**



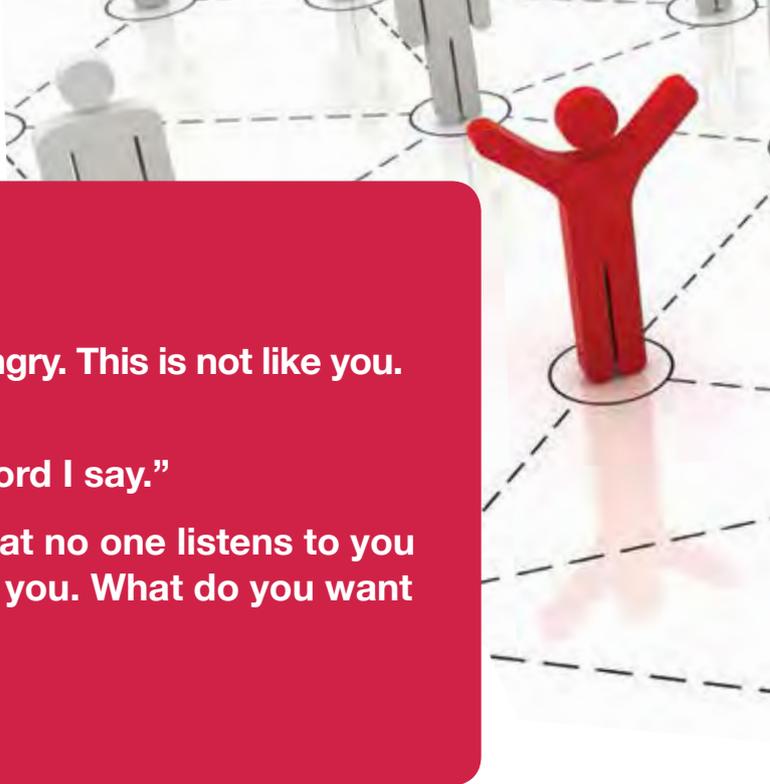
## How to deal with a disturbance in the workplace

- If the employee is angry and creating a scene, ask them to talk to you somewhere more private.
- Once the colleague is sitting in a quiet place, leave them for a few minutes to collect their thoughts before starting to discuss the events.
- Keep cool and let their anger blow out. Say little or nothing until the anger has subsided.
- Speak calmly to avoid re-igniting the situation.
- Restore calm as quickly and easily as possible – this is not the time to address complex or difficult issues.
- Unless the outburst is serious enough to warrant further action, avoid recriminations or referring to the incident once it has been dealt with – your aim is to move on.
- The employee may need to apologise to colleagues who have been upset by the incident.



## How to deal with anger that surfaces during your conversation

- Be calm before you walk into a meeting that you suspect may trigger an outburst.
  - Distance yourself. Don't take anger personally – your primary concern is the other person.
  - Consider whether your own safety may be at risk.
  - If the anger is directed at you and the person becomes abusive, ask them to stop.
  - You may need to suspend the meeting for a short time to allow tempers to cool.
  - When their anger subsides, show understanding by acknowledging the other person's view – this does not mean agreeing with it or condoning their behaviour.
  - Allow your colleague to explain why they are angry in their own words – do not interrupt or interpret their words for them. You may find the angry person feels criticised, unimportant, powerless, thwarted, frightened or hurt. Hopefully you will unearth what they find upsetting; then you can look for a solution.
  - You may need to suggest that the meeting be postponed until the person has recovered their poise. Explain why you are doing this and fix a time to continue the conversation.
- 
- Make accusations.
  - Say: "Calm down" – it will make the situation worse.
  - Join in an argument or raise your voice – you will only prolong the argument.
  - Assume that you know what's really going on – always ask the person to help you understand what lies behind their anger.
  - Say: "I understand." It invites the immediate reply: "No you don't," which takes you nowhere.
  - Avoid conflict by walking away, unless things are getting out of control or you feel threatened.



## Diffusing anger

**Manager:** “I can see you’re very angry. This is not like you. What’s upsetting you?”

**Colleague:** “Nobody listens to a word I say.”

**Manager:** “Okay, you’re saying that no one listens to you. Well, I am listening to you. What do you want to tell me?”

## How to deal with a distressed colleague

Distress can range from mild to severe and, if prolonged, can lead to mental ill health. The triggers for distress can include the loss of a close friend or relative, serious illness, relationship problems, financial or legal problems, or severe work difficulties. Such problems affect everyone differently, but the changes they can bring about include: reduced performance such as missing deadlines or lower productivity; and unusual behaviour including mood swings, social withdrawal, irritability or anger.

Managers can play a crucial role in preventing and managing distress.

- Find a quiet, private place to talk.
- Give your undivided attention – this will speak much louder than any words.
- Allow the employee time to control their emotions.
- Express your concerns in a supportive and non-judgmental manner – avoid criticism as this may stop your conversation in its tracks.
- Assure them that you will work together to improve the situation and that there are things that can be done and people that can help.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage – but not pressure – them to talk, such as: “You seem very emotional – can we talk about what’s upsetting you?”
- Remind them that your role is to help to find a way to solve their problems and enable them to do their job to the best of their abilities.

◀ Do



**Be calm,  
attentive and  
encourage new  
conversations**

- Get to the root of what is going on – only then will you be able to work with the person on a plan to remedy the situation.
  - If they remain too distressed to talk, ask if there is a friend at work who could provide comfort or support. You could also suggest postponing the meeting until they are less emotional.
  - Remind them: “It’s okay to be upset – it’s only human.”
  - Encourage an individual to seek help if their medical condition is potentially a factor in their distress.
  - Give the person information on resources or individuals you believe can help. If you are sufficiently concerned, you may need to suggest the person contacts their GP, occupational health or, if it has one, your organisation’s employee assistance programme (a confidential counselling service for help with difficult situations). There are also organisations that can offer advice and support in specific areas, such as the Samaritans or Mind.
  - Arrange a time to meet again to check on their wellbeing and on the progress of any action.
- 
- Say or imply: “For heaven’s sake pull yourself together.”
  - Try to diagnose the person – you are not a doctor or counsellor. You need to understand the problem only in so far as it makes it easier for the person to do their job.
  - Get involved beyond what you feel comfortable to do.
  - Try to reassure the person or offer medical advice from past personal experience – everyone is different and medical circumstances vary widely.

# Encouraging unresponsive colleagues to be more open

**Some important conversations are difficult, even impossible, because the employee is resistant or unresponsive. However, if you remain calm and encourage them to talk, even the most taciturn person is likely to respond.**

- If you know or suspect that the person is likely to be unresponsive, allow plenty of time for the meeting.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage answers that go beyond “yes” or “no”.
- Wait calmly for the person to reply.
- Do not fill silences with your words – most people will begin to talk if you wait long enough.
- If you get no response, comment on the situation and finish with an open-ended question: “If I understand the situation correctly...”
- Keep control by dealing sympathetically but firmly with questions such as, “Can I go now?” or responses such as “I don’t know.”
- When they do begin to open up, be attentive and show you are interested. Go with the flow – it may lead somewhere important.
- Recognise that it may have been hard for them to talk and thank them for doing so.
- If they remain silent, end the meeting and fix another date. Explain what you intend to do in the meantime, given that you haven’t been able to solve the situation together.

While not silent, a colleague’s attitude may be so negative that it is difficult to be constructive.

- Make optimistic but realistic statements about past successes in solving similar problems.
- Don’t try to argue them out of their pessimism.
- Don’t offer potential solutions until the problem has been thoroughly discussed and you know what you are dealing with.
- Do point out that a negative attitude will not help either of you find a solution that works for both the person and the organisation.

# Knowing what to say if you believe an employee may have a mental health condition or other disability

There could be a disability dimension, such as a mental health condition, at the heart of a colleague's difficulties. Given that one in four people experience a mental health condition such as anxiety or depression at some point in their life and given most physical disabilities – for example, diabetes, dyslexia, hearing impairment or arthritis – are non-visible, most managers are likely to have conversations with a disability element. Such conversations can be challenging, even embarrassing, but do not avoid them.

## If the employee approaches you

- 
- Thank them for raising the issue. Talking about a non-visible disability, and especially a mental health problem, is often very difficult for people – acknowledging their courage and honesty helps to build trust.
  - Even if you are unsure of the right words to use, it is better to talk about a disability than it is to ignore the issue just because you're worried you might say the wrong thing. Most people would rather you addressed the situation, no matter how imperfectly.
  - Try to find out the facts. How long has this been going on? Have they spoken with anyone about this? Do they feel it's affecting their performance now?
  - Offer resources, not advice. And beware of invading someone's privacy.
  - Ask what they would like you to do – and prefer you not to do.
  - Say: "What could we do differently that would make it easier for you to do your job?"

## Taking the lead

If the individual with the disability is doing their job well and doesn't need you to make any changes to their working environment or working practices, then there is probably no reason for you or the company to know, or for them to tell you, about their disability. However, as with any personal matter, disability and/or health issues become the business of the workplace when they affect the person's ability to do the job. Under these circumstances, managers do need to take action.

Mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression may not be readily apparent but there are signs, notably changes in behaviour, which an observant manager will notice:

- Out-of-character behaviour.
- Withdrawing from others.
- Being quiet when normally talkative or vice versa.
- Arriving late when usually punctual.
- Staying late when generally leaving on time.
- Having difficulty doing things they normally take in their stride.
- Becoming irritable or tearful.
- Unusual poor performance or time keeping.
- Increased use of drugs, alcohol, coffee or cigarettes.
- Unusual poor judgment and decision-making.
- Tiredness and low energy.
- Poor personal hygiene.
- Increased sickness or absence.

Some people may not want to talk. This could be because they fear discrimination, stigma or are anxious about their colleagues' reaction. They may well not consider themselves to be disabled and find the term unhelpful. If the individual does not approach you, then you will have to take the lead, assuming their condition is having an impact at work. Remember, if you have cause for concern, don't let things drift until you have a serious problem on your hands.



**Be an  
observant  
manager**

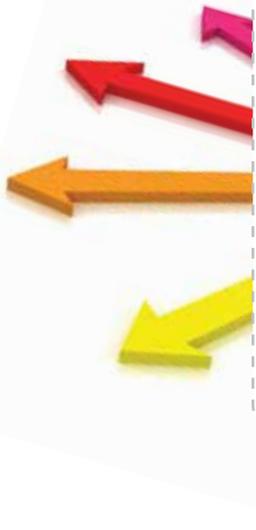


## You're not a doctor

As a manager you don't need to know the medical ins and outs of a person's disability or health condition – you are not a doctor. Personal details about a health condition are often sensitive and it is unnecessary and intrusive to ask for such. Your role is simply to enable the person to do their job. Conversations should be positive and supportive – exploring the issues and seeing what can be done to help.

- Respect their privacy and confidentiality.
- Make it clear that you value the person as an important member of the team.
- Use open questions that allow people to express their concerns in their own way: “How are you doing?” or “Is there anything I can do to help?”
- Treat them as the expert – ask what they think might help or whether they too need more information.
- Share any observations that lead you to believe a disability or health condition may be affecting their behaviour or work performance.
- Discuss how work might affect their condition – what adjustments do they think might help?
- Say: “We try to be flexible in how we do things so that everyone, I repeat everyone, can do their best. Now we need your help to figure out what will work for you.”
- Ask if they have any particular concerns: are they asking themselves, for example: “Will this mean I will be passed over for promotion?” “What will my colleagues think?” or “Will I lose my job in the next round of redundancies?”
- Ask if their treatment could be affecting their work performance, such as the side effects of medication or time off for therapy, and what adjustments or support they might need.
- The employee may become upset and cry – show sympathy, but keep calm and carry on.

- Be prepared to seek advice if a medical issue is raised that may have an impact on a person's safety, that of colleague's or the general public.
  - Discuss what (if anything) the person wants or needs to tell colleagues.
  - Go through the pros and cons of different courses of action.
  - Agree a plan about who will do what and what will happen next.
  - Ask about any potential safety considerations arising from a person's work, such as driving, working alone or using dangerous machinery.
- 
- Assume that the problem lies at work.
  - Attribute all problems to mental health difficulties – everyone has off days and experiences challenging life situations.
  - Assume that everyone finds the same things stressful or responds to stress in the same way.
  - Assume that taking time off or reducing workload is always the answer.
  - Attempt a diagnosis – simply describe what you have seen that gives grounds for concern.
  - Assume that medical intervention is the solution.
  - Use clinical terms such as bi-polar – you are a manager not a doctor.
  - Make promises you are unable – or unwilling – to keep. Be realistic and find the practical solution that works best for both the person and the organisation.



## Tailored adjustment agreements

Business Disability Forum's 'Tailored adjustment agreement' is a record of the adjustments that have been agreed between a disabled employee and their manager. It minimises the need to re-negotiate adjustments every time the employee changes jobs or is assigned a new manager. To download the 'Tailored adjustment agreement' please visit [www.disabilitystandard.com](http://www.disabilitystandard.com).

Taking an open approach often bears fruit, leading the person to discuss their difficulties and enabling a solution to be found. However, some problems may require professional advice and support, whether through work-based occupational health services such as counselling or by suggesting the employee makes an appointment with their GP, calls NHS 111 or goes to the accident and emergency service of their nearest hospital.

If you fear or suspect that the employee may feel suicidal, see our guidance on page 31. It is important to explain that you are worried about the person and need reassurance that they won't do anything untoward. If the situation appears serious or if you are worried that something terrible will happen, you can offer to take them to their doctor or accident and emergency. If you think they may have already taken an overdose, call an ambulance.

## Managing a person returning after a period of mental health absence

Fear, ignorance and hostility from colleagues can cause great distress to someone with a mental health condition.

- Talk to the returning employee and agree who will be told what, by whom and when – be clear about confidentiality and boundaries.
  - Be guided by what the person wants – some people are more open than others; don't pressure everyone to share their personal stories.
  - Treat people who are returning from absence due to mental health conditions in the same matter-of-fact way as you would those with physical impairments.
  - Watch for hostile or negative reactions – stamp out any hurtful gossip or bullying promptly.
  - After a time, ask the employee how he or she is getting on and check to see if they need any further support.
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- Shroud the subject in secrecy.
  - Make assumptions about workloads and the person's capacity to cope.
  - Behave as though the person is "sick", given your task is to enable them to do their best at work.

## Dealing with employees who complain that a disabled colleague is getting special or preferential treatment

Harmonious working relationships are key to effective performance; complaints that a disabled colleague is getting special treatment can affect the office atmosphere. This can create a tricky situation, as managers need to balance the interests of the person with the disability and the needs and expectations of the wider team.

- Remind the employee who complains that the organisation cannot perform effectively unless every team member does their best work.
- Point out that the organisation therefore tries to be flexible for everyone; for example, when someone is taking a sabbatical or has a personal emergency. This willingness to show flexibility is not done as a favour, but for the overall benefit of the team and the work.
- If – or you suspect – there is an underlying issue affecting those complaining, consider asking what they might want organisation to do for them.
- Remind the person that, if they should require an adjustment for a disability, the organisation will also try to meet those needs.
- You may need to say: "We have learned that employers need to treat people differently to treat them fairly – and to ensure we meet our obligations in law."



## Taking the right steps can prevent disquiet about preferential treatment

- Communicate clearly any new arrangements for individuals and address any uncertainties in the team.
- Anticipate questions from the team and prepare.
- Ask for comments and questions from the outset.
- Discuss the facts of any adjustment and how it enables performance, not the disability of the person.
- Emphasise that to work effectively together, team members must recognise and adjust for individual needs. Some of those are practical — an adjusted schedule to reduce the physical strain of commuting at rush hour — but some may be behavioural; chronic pain can cause irritability, for example.
- Show your support for the person with a disability – this isn't about favouritism, but ensures your actions demonstrate that you value the person's contribution.



# Managing conversations that could lead to disciplinary measures

## Dealing with unacceptable behaviour

Unacceptable behaviour must be addressed promptly. While there may be reasons for such behaviour, it has no place in the workplace. Some behaviour, such as the use of offensive language or bullying, may require disciplinary action.

This is a potentially difficult area for a manager: they may have to deal with the immediate problem, diffusing a situation and restoring calm; but, subsequently, they may also be involved in disciplinary or grievance proceedings. A manager needs to act impartially, avoid compromising any subsequent investigation and keep an accurate record of their actions and any incidents.

Before you act, you need to meet the person who is behaving in an unacceptable manner.

- Do your homework before the meeting, including developing a working knowledge of how the organisation expects good managers to respond. Familiarise yourself with any relevant policy and follow it.
- If the person is unaware of the problem, describe which behaviours are unacceptable and why.
- Give the person the opportunity to explain what is happening from their perspective – do not assume you know what is really going on.
- If the person accepts that a problem exists, help them to get back on track.
- Try to determine if there is a disability-related dimension – for example, has an employee with a learning or cognitive disability broken the rules because they didn't understand them, couldn't read them, or couldn't remember them?
- If the person refuses to accept that there is a problem, explain it again. You may need to put this in writing.
- You may need to take firmer action, including beginning disciplinary action.

## Dealing with under-performance

Concerns about poor performance are common and it can require difficult conversations to resolve them, but managers should always be aware that a person's performance could be affected by a non-visible disability – or by other factors given we all lead complex lives. Furthermore, they must separate any advice and coaching about performance from any formal performance management process. The latter requires careful attention is paid to an organisation's procedures and policies.

- Deal promptly with any concerns.
- Have all the facts to hand before you meet the employee.
- Make sure the person does not think they are being disciplined – explain that you want to talk about their recent performance.
- Start from the assumption the individual wants to do well.
- Give positive feedback before moving on to talk about how you would like them to improve their performance.
- Ask the person how they think they are doing at work – they may not be aware that there is a problem.
- Turn your criticism of the person's performance into a question: "You seem to be having trouble – what can we do about it?" invites a positive, constructive response.
- Be specific and factual – explain how they have fallen short of the standards you expect and what you need them to change.
- Talk about the problem, not the person.
- Ask them what they think is causing the difficulty.
- Press gently for answers while reassuring them that you want to help.
- Ask what you as a manager could do differently to enable them to do better.
- Describe the help and support you can provide.
- Offer understanding and support if problems outside work are affecting their performance.
- Formulate a plan together to improve their performance – this could mean changes to workload or working hours.
- Fix a time for a further meeting to review progress.

## Knowing when and how to seek advice and support

On occasions the distress of a colleague may be extreme. The following signs could indicate that a person is severely distressed, perhaps even at risk of harm. If you see or hear, or are informed by a colleague, that the employee is:

- Making references to feeling helpless or hopeless.
- Seeking isolation from colleagues.
- Exhibiting threatening or dangerous behaviour.
- Or making remarks about suicide or harm to self or others,

then you must take immediate action. Such signs are sometimes referred to as “red flags”. If you detect these warning signs of distress, don’t ignore them.

People are most at risk of harming themselves if they have an actual plan in mind, have had similar experiences in the past and have the means at hand to take their own life.

- Leave the person alone – make sure someone stays with them and seek immediate help.
  - Hope that things will get better on their own – this may be a desperate cry for help.
  - Show shock or your own distress – this will not help the person.
  - Minimise or brush off the intensity of their feelings.
  - Analyse their motives, argue or lecture.
  - Ridicule or use guilt in the hope that you can “talk them out of it”.
  - Be sworn to secrecy.
- 
- During working hours: contact occupational health or the employee assistance programme (a confidential counselling service for help with difficult situations that some organisations operate);  
*or* their doctor,  
*or* NHS 111 (England and Wales),  
*or* NHS 24 in Scotland on 08454 242424;  
*or* to the accident and emergency service of the nearest hospital;  
*or* dial 999 and ask for assistance;  
*or* call the Samaritans on 08457 909090;  
*or* mental health charity Mind on 0300 123 3393.
  - Get some support for yourself through the employee assistance programme, colleagues, your own manager or HR.



## Problems of your own?

**Managers are not superhuman!**  
**On occasions, you may need to approach your own manager to discuss something that is worrying you.**

- Before you meet your manager, make notes about what you want to say and what you hope to get out of the conversation.
- If the problem is work-related, talk about what both of you can do to help the situation.
- If the problem is outside work, it's up to you how much you say. You may not want to reveal the most personal things in detail but try to say something which conveys the scale of the concern, such as: "My partner has lost her job and we're in a financial mess."
- Talk about how long things have been difficult and whether you think it's a short or long-term issue.
- You may choose to reveal that you are receiving medical help such as counselling or medication, or seeing your GP.
- You might ask your employer to provide help through occupational health or an employee assistance programme.
- Talk about any ideas you have that you think might help; for example, adjusting work times or altering duties.
- Discuss who else needs to know and what they need to know.
- You might like to take a colleague or trade union representative with you to the meeting. Make sure one of you takes written notes and that each of you has a copy.
- Agree when and how you're going to review the situation and any plans agreed.

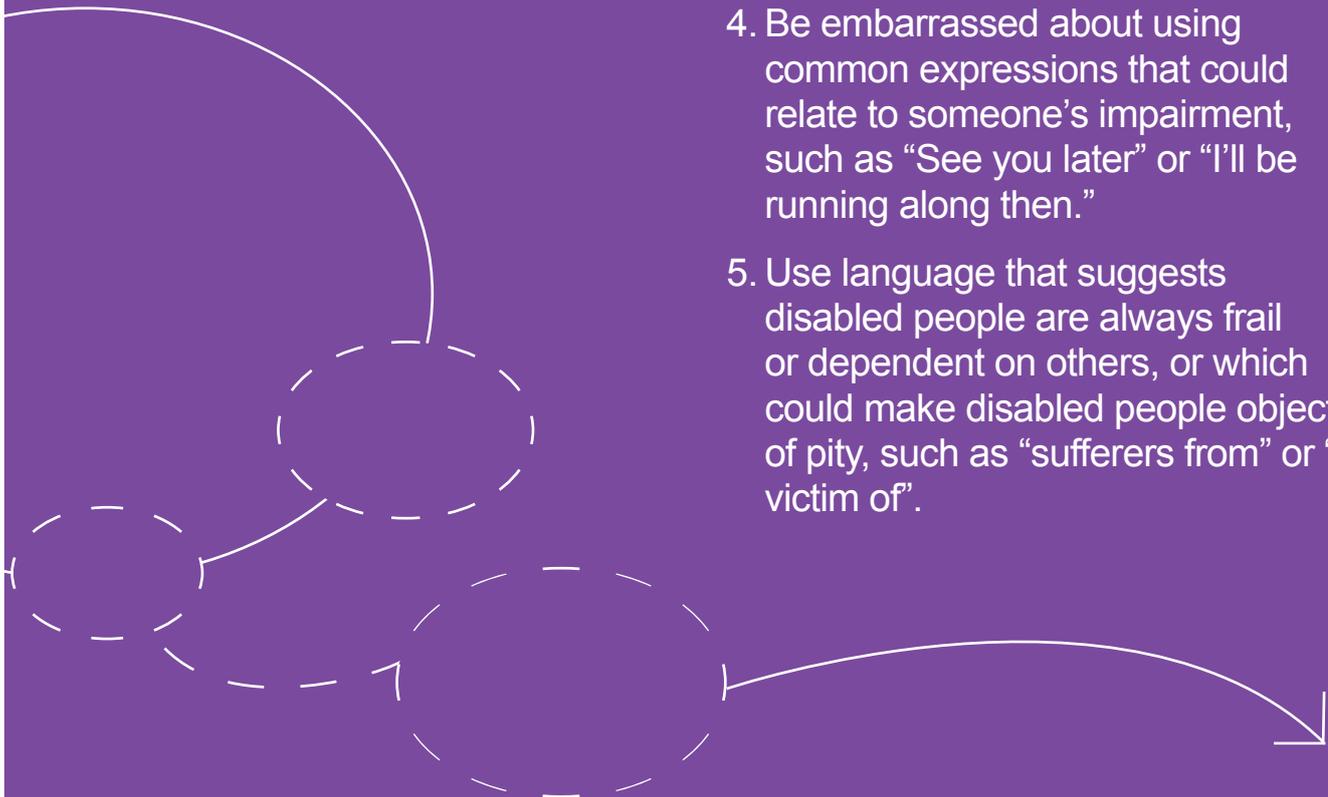
# Disability etiquette: 10 dos and don'ts

## Do ▼

1. Treat a disabled person in the same manner and with the same respect and courtesy you would anyone else.
2. Use a normal tone of voice.
3. Be patient and non-judgmental.
4. Restrain your curiosity.
5. Speak directly to the disabled person, even if they are accompanied by an interpreter or companion.

## Don't ▼

1. Ask: "What happened to you?"
2. Make assumptions – many people have disabilities that are not visible or immediately apparent. And don't assume you know what assistance, if any, the disabled person requires.
3. Define a disabled person by their impairment – nobody wants to be given a medical label. Referring to a person as "an epileptic" is dehumanising. If you need to refer to a person's condition, say: "A person who has epilepsy."
4. Be embarrassed about using common expressions that could relate to someone's impairment, such as "See you later" or "I'll be running along then."
5. Use language that suggests disabled people are always frail or dependent on others, or which could make disabled people objects of pity, such as "sufferers from" or "a victim of".



**Thanks to the following for their help in producing this guide:**

- Peaceworks, a not-for-profit mediation agency based on the south coast of England.
- ‘Successful assertiveness in a week’, Dena Michelli (2012), Hodder Education.
- ‘Dealing with difficult people’, Roy Lilley (revised edition 2010), KoganPage.
- ‘Keeping well at work’, Mindful Employer (2012).
- ‘Getting support, supporting others: a handbook for working with non-visible disabilities’, Ernst & Young (2010).
- Rachel Perkins, BA, MPhil (Clinical Psychology) PhD, OBE.
- ‘Managing people in distress’, BT HR Employee Communications.
- Dr Steve Boorman, Jonathan Males, Michael O’Donnell and Steve Walter for reading the draft guide and making helpful suggestions.

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**Further sources of information from Business Disability Forum**

- Disability communication guide.
- Non-visible disabilities: line manager guide.
- Performance management: line manager guide.
- Reasonable adjustments: line manager guide.
- Mental health at work: line manager guide.
- Attendance management and disability: line manager guide.
- Working with disabled colleagues: line manager guide.
- Business Disability Forum’s ‘Tailored adjustment agreement’

# About our sponsor

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## **KPMG's commitment to attracting, developing and supporting disabled people**

At KPMG we believe in building diverse teams to succeed in the ever changing world of work. We are determined to increase the diversity in our workforce and together, make KPMG a great place to work.

We have made progress in attracting and nurturing disabled talent by providing development programmes and establishing a disability network, called Workability. We've been recognised for this by being awarded 'best business-to-business service provider' and ranking silver for Business Disability Forum's Disability Standard in 2013.

It's a great start, but more work is needed to create an inclusive workplace; that's why our leadership is committed to improving our disability inclusion.

Diversity and inclusion is everyone's responsibility at KPMG and we appreciate that this sometimes means having difficult conversations. Difficult conversations should not be avoided and that is why we are proud to sponsor this guide. We believe it will help our employees have those conversations, better.

In the words of Ben Iles, leader of the KPMG Workability Network,

**“Inclusion is at the heart of our business and we demonstrated this when we established the Workability network in 2012. Colleagues with disabilities suggested they would find it easier to discuss issues with specific people and as a result we made sure that we had at least one named representative for each of our 22 offices, to help and raise awareness of the forms of support that KPMG offers as well as dealing with disability-related queries.”**

**“Our facilitators are involved with a range of internal and external activities. They have shown great enthusiasm and the increased exposure has resulted in further volunteers coming forward to offer assistance. Their example will hopefully be followed by others once they have had the opportunity to read this guide.”**





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