

## **KW Inner Strength**

### **A Guide to Managing Difficult Conversations to Achieve Successful Outcomes**

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Would you like to feel more confident to deal with the difficult conversations in your business, to manage the performance, behaviour and attendance issues in your team? While it can feel uncomfortable to have those conversations, nothing will change if you don't have them and you might lose high-performing people if they feel frustrated over your lack of action towards those who are performing less well.

Lots of people avoid the difficult conversations in their business. Small niggles, which don't seem worth a challenge, can become normalised and embedded into work practices very easily, where they grow into bigger issues and problems which are more difficult to deal with.

Difficult conversations can take up a lot of headspace and cause people to worry. Will they say the right thing? Will they know what to do if the person escalates their behaviours and gets angry with them? It can be a challenge to deal with issues assertively and effectively, and it can be tempting to avoid the conversations altogether.

This guide to managing difficult conversations to achieve successful outcomes gives you fifteen tips to help build your confidence to tackle the difficult conversations assertively, manage performance, behaviour and attendance issues effectively and achieve positive outcomes to support the strength, resilience and success of your business.

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**Tip #1** - Environment is key - find a place where you can have the conversation confidentially. Avoid glass fronted offices where colleagues can see someone become frustrated or upset. The office gossips love that stuff so don't give them more to talk about and respect the privacy of the person you're talking to.

**Tip #2** - If someone's performance, behaviour or attendance isn't what you'd expect, there's usually a reason as to why that is. If you make them feel safe, they'll probably tell you what the problem is and you can work together to improve things.

If you struggle to put your frustrations aside and wade in with a more aggressive approach, they won't tell you anything and nothing will change.

In the whirl of busy days, it can be challenging to set pressures aside, to have a calm and constructive conversation with someone about why they're not working to their usual standard. But if you can do it, you'll reap the rewards for the future development and success of your business.

**Tip #3** - Give specific evidence of the problem. A general "you never.....on time or properly!" won't land and you'll lose credibility by not being able to give a specific example of the issue you're looking to address.

General feedback can make the person feel that all of their work performance is being criticised. If you're specific about what the problem is, they'll understand exactly what you're looking for them to change, and you might be able to help them do that, once you know more about the problem.

**Tip #4** - If you never check in with people and speak to them, they're very unlikely to share their difficulties with you. If you build relationships with your team on the good days, they're more likely to come to you for help and support when they're struggling.

As a Leader or Manager, you have your own work; pressures to meet deadlines and frustrations of when things aren't going to plan. Time for connecting with, managing and leading your people is very rarely factored into your day but if you don't do it, you might struggle to connect with people when you do need to have a difficult conversation with them.

Those conversations aren't easy, so try to connect with people on a general level to help you both when you need to connect on a more formal level.

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**Tip #5** - Think about how your expectations of performance, behaviour and attendance are defined. Are you consistent in what you expect from people, or do you treat your work 'pals' differently? Inconsistencies and inequalities in what you expect from people can make it very difficult to address an issue.

It can take time to develop policies and procedures, and if you're in a smaller organisation you might not think it's worth the effort to do that. But defined policies and procedures can help you to manage performance, behaviour and attendance issues assertively and effectively. They'll make the difficult conversations much easier. Without them, you might struggle.

**Tip#6** - Do you demonstrate the behaviours you expect to see from people or is there one rule for you, and one for them? It's very difficult to address an issue when the individual saw you doing the exact same thing yesterday! Double standards will undermine your ability to address issues effectively.

If people see you demonstrate role model behaviours, most of the time and being honest about the days when you don't, they'll be more likely to come to you proactively if a problem develops instead of waiting for an issue to escalate before you're made aware of it. They'll feel safe to share their difficulties if they see you do that too.

**Tip#7** - While a friendly approach is good at the start of the conversation, don't make things so friendly that the person feels side-swiped when you raise the performance, behaviour or attendance issue you need to discuss. You can be kind and supportive, but you're looking for things to change so it's good to have a level of formality around the conversation.

**Tip#8** - Try not to waffle. You might be nervous about having the conversation but try to state the problem clearly, give specific evidence of when it's occurred, and clarify the impact of that, on customers, colleagues or you (for instance). If people understand the wider impact of their actions, they're more likely to make improvements.

Difficult conversations aren't the way most of us want to spend our working day but if you have to have them, make sure you're fully prepared. That'll help you to feel more confident to manage the conversation effectively and achieve positive outcomes.

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**Tip #9** - Once you've explained the details of the problem, given evidence of when it's happened and confirmed the impact of it, give the person time to respond. There might be things going on, either in or outside of work that you're not aware of, which could have been making things difficult.

If that's the case, you can talk about the best way for the person to communicate any problems to you, to give you the chance to offer support and make things easier for them. That allows you to work proactively rather than reactively, and that can make your day feel much more productive.

**Tip #10** - By giving the person time to explain why their performance, behaviour or attendance hasn't been to the usual standard, you show that you're open to supporting an improvement. You can work together to secure a successful outcome for both of you.

Try to leave your frustrations at the door and listen with an open mind. It can be really difficult to do that, particularly when you're overloaded with work and the issue you're addressing isn't making things any flippin easier! But, if you can leave that at the door, you're more likely to listen well and support the person to improve.

If your frustrations are with you as you talk about things and they come across to the other person during the conversation, they're less likely to feel safe to be honest and open with you. So you might just end up sticking a plaster on a problem that you actually could have resolved in the meeting. So at some point you'll probably have to come back around to discuss it again and that's not the best use of either of your time.

**Tip #11** - By giving someone the chance to explain why their performance, behaviour or attendance hasn't been to the usual standard, you can identify barriers to progress that you've not been made aware of. You can't know the finer details of every team member's job. There might be something that's really easy for you to resolve. Then you can talk about how people report progress and issues so that you can help them with that stuff.

When people see that you're really busy, they often don't want to add to the pressures of your day by telling you about yet another problem. But it is part of your role to offer support and make things easier for the team if you can, so talk to them about how they can make you aware of any problems. You might say, "it's fine to interrupt me" if that's OK with you, or you might prefer an email heads up.

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The choice is yours but let people know how they can make you aware of problems before they escalate into bigger service issues. That gets you all working more proactively and often reduces the need for the difficult conversations.

**Tip #12** - If the person becomes frustrated during the conversation and their behaviours escalate, stay calm. Do not match their escalating behaviours. You can say you're frustrated by the situation, as they are but don't match their tone or behaviour. By staying calm, you'll help to de-escalate the situation more quickly.

Sometimes it can be useful to let people vent for a bit, particularly if you know their situation has been very difficult recently. But be mindful after a minute or so, whether that's the best use of either of your time. To move the conversation on, you might say "OK, I can see you're frustrated but how are we going to move things forward?". That puts the conversation back into a more positive and constructive place which should help the person calm down and progress the conversation.

**Tip #13** - If someone behaves in an aggressive manner towards you, verbally or physically, confirm that you won't continue the meeting at that time, because of their behaviour. Confirm the conversation will be continued and you'll let them know when that's to be.

Leave the meeting, even if they start to apologise for their behaviour. Make sure you record the details of the conversation and notify your Line Manger and/or HR to ensure a record of the person's behaviour is maintained. Or, if you work in a smaller business, keep your own record of the conversation in a confidential employee file.

While these situations are quite rare, they can take their toll on you so try to take a break before you go back to work if that's possible. Try to de-brief with your Line Manager if they're available or let them know what's happened at least. It's important that you're looked after, following a situation like that and supported before you return for the next round of the conversation.

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**Tip #14** - Be clear about what needs to change and by when. After a difficult conversation it can be tempting to give a more general 'it needs to improve' expectation, as by that point you probably just want the conversation to end and to get back to work! But if you define specific expectations for change, it'll inform the follow up conversation really well.

A more general 'it needs to improve' approach gives the individual the scope to come away from the meeting thinking that you were just having a bad day. You were in a grump because things have been so busy recently. Be very specific about what needs to change, so the individual has absolute clarity on what they need to do.

**Tip #15** - Confirm how you'll monitor progress of the improvements to be made. State the timescale for the first progress meeting (a week's time for example) and send a meeting request as soon as possible after the end of your initial meeting. That shows the individual that you're keeping track of whether improvements are being made and are taking a reasonably formal approach to dealing with the issue.

Without a follow up, an individual may well feel that their progress won't be checked, so they don't need to make an improvement. Ongoing monitoring gives a greater impetus for change.

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If you'd like further support to manage difficult conversations to achieve successful outcomes, you can work through our online training programme at your own pace. With twelve videos (approx. three hours running time) and five presentations, the programme can help if you:

- ✓ fear confrontation and doubt your ability to deal with an issue effectively
- ✓ struggle to be assertive and find the right language in the moment
- ✓ feel intimidated if the conversation escalates and struggle to put your point across
- ✓ worry that your inexperience of difficult conversations will make you appear nervous and the impact of your message will be lost
- ✓ feel reluctant to tackle performance, behaviour and attendance issues because they've become normalised and embedded in your day-to-day work practices
- ✓ feel overwhelmed by the number of performance, behaviour and attendance issues there are to deal with in the team
- ✓ want to implement more structured performance management processes to recognise great work and identify and support areas for improvement
- ✓ want to develop your organisational culture to deal with issues more proactively to support an effective workforce wellbeing culture

You can check the full content of the course before you buy and use the coupon code 'kw\_online\_newsletter' to access the training for the discounted price of £215.00. (Usual price £249.95).

<https://kw-innerstrength-online-learning.thinkific.com/courses/managing-difficult-conversations-to-achieve-successful-outcomes>

You can check out our online and face-to-face training solutions at <https://kw-innerstrength.com/personal-and-professional-development/> or get in touch to discuss your specific requirements.

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