




QUARTERLY SPECIAL REPORT

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

*Five common mistakes
managers make*




HUMAN RESOURCES



Difficult conversations play a big part in employee management. On any given day, managers face employee relations issues ranging from minor skirmishes among coworkers, to performance problems and disciplinary challenges, to allegations of discrimination or complaints of harassment.

While these issues may differ in seriousness, one thing they have in common is that they require the ability to effectively communicate with the employees involved. Yet, many managers lack the knowledge and training to handle the variety of conversations (often difficult, awkward, and uncomfortable) that can arise from these issues.

Managers who are ill-equipped to confront employee relations issues are likely to make costly mistakes. These costs are often discussed in terms of lawsuits, but countless studies and surveys reveal that poor management most commonly leads to lower productivity, low employee morale, and high turnover.



The cost of turnover will vary by company and industry, but the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) predicts that every time a business replaces an employee, it costs between 6 and 9 months' salary on average. And, according to a Pew Research Center survey released in 2022, among those who quit a job in the previous year, 57 percent said they felt disrespected at work, often by a manager.

All of this means that poor management can be costly to a business, even if it doesn't result in a lawsuit. Are you training managers to effectively handle difficult employee conversations? Or are they making some of these common mistakes, and potentially leading good workers right out the door?

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of employees who left a job said they felt disrespected at work.

#1 IGNORING THE ISSUE

One of the many challenges managers face is knowing when and how to address seemingly insignificant infractions of the rules, or minor employee squabbles. Generally, managers understand that allegations of discrimination and harassment are serious and need to be addressed immediately, but less significant behavioral issues, such as rudeness or tardiness, are sometimes ignored.

The trouble with this tactic is that the ignored behavior almost never stops on its own.

Further, the poor conduct often causes additional issues because other employees form their own perceptions about the situation, and act accordingly.

For example, a top-performing salesperson persistently shows up late for meetings and loudly refuses to comply with the dress code. The manager decides that while this behavior is not ideal, it's OK to let it slide because "that is just how Bill is." Besides, if Bill meets the sales goals every month, there shouldn't be a problem, right?

Ignored tardiness sends a message to other employees that the behavior is acceptable.





If this behavior is not addressed, however, the manager may be sending the message to other employees that tardiness is perfectly acceptable, and that the dress code is a mere suggestion. So, when another employee starts showing up 10 minutes late, and yet another determines that jeans and sneakers are appropriate workplace attire, the manager will have a larger problem to address. Not only will the manager need to discuss tardiness and dress code violations with the perpetrators (including, belatedly, Bill), but now there may be accusations of favoritism. (“Bill does it all the time and never gets reprimanded!”)

Nip small infractions in the bud before they bloom into larger issues.

If after the first incident, the manager had simply taken Bill aside and said, “It is important for you to be on time to the meeting. I expect you to make every effort to be here before it starts,” these additional issues may have been avoided. Managers should understand that seemingly small infractions, which don’t necessarily require discipline, still need to be nipped in the bud before they can bloom into larger issues.

#2 DANCING AROUND THE ISSUE

Sometimes a manager will decide that rather than dealing with an individual problem, it is easier to implement a new policy or procedure that applies to the whole group. While it is important to have policies in place to communicate expectations and ensure a safe, nondiscriminatory workplace, policymaking should be reserved for issues that impact the many — not created for the few. Crafting a new policy or rule is not a substitute for addressing issues with individual employees who are not meeting expectations or adhering to current rules.

For example, a manager notices that an employee is away from their workstation for 15 to 20 minutes at a time, several times a day. The employee has been covertly talking and texting on a cellphone from the bathroom. Instead of confronting the individual directly about the behavior, however, the manager gathers the team together and reminds them that they are required to be present at their workstations unless they are on an authorized break. The manager then declares that unplanned breaks (including bathroom trips) should be limited to no more than three minutes.



Does this reaction stop the employee from cellphone use during work time? Probably not, because the manager failed to confront that as the specific behavior problem in this scenario. The employee is likely to find another location to use the cellphone, and the manager is now in the awkward and bizarre role of bathroom police to the rest of the team.

Directly confronting the offender would have been a better solution, but starting a disciplinary conversation can be uncomfortable for a manager. When handled properly, however, such a discussion is more likely to resolve the problem, and also avoid creating additional issues by involving the rest of the team members who are not violating the rules.

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#3 FLYING BY THE SEAT OF THEIR PANTS

Very few employee relations incidents require an immediate response, but that doesn't stop some managers from reacting reflexively — and sometimes inappropriately. Some managers are quick to jump to conclusions, rush to judgment, or blow up at employees in frustration.

However, managers who make assumptions about behaviors or skip over inquiries are unlikely to come up with good solutions to employee problems.

In fact, a study from researchers at the Columbia University Medical Center found that accuracy in decision making can be improved even if a decision is postponed by only a fraction of a second. The study's researchers determined that delaying a decision by as little as 50 to 100 milliseconds allows the brain to focus on the most relevant information and block out distractors — that simply by doing nothing for a beat, a person is more likely to make a better decision.





So before jumping headlong into a potentially difficult conversation with an employee, managers should take the time to fully evaluate, analyze, and understand a scenario, and then plan an approach. They might try asking themselves:



Can you fully explain the situation? Can you describe exactly what action or behavior is creating the problem? How is the behavior affecting the employee, the team, or the company?



How might you approach the person about the behavior? What are the potential consequences of that approach? What is your ideal outcome in this situation?



What information are you lacking? Where might you find that information?

Managers who can imagine the conversation beforehand, prepare for various reactions, and think of contingencies, will be better equipped to remain calm, understand the problem, and think of appropriate solutions when handling difficult conversations.

#4 HEARING, BUT NOT LISTENING

It is rare for people to give conversations their undivided attention these days. Whether it is a symptom of the technology age, or an effort to increase efficiency through multi-tasking, the results are often less than desirable.

People need to feel like they are being acknowledged and understood during conversation. Managers who continue to read emails or take calls during conversations, who don't maintain eye contact and/or interrupt employees, are not only discourteous, but they are also ineffectual.

A manager who is not listening might miss an employee's request for accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). An individual making a request for accommodation doesn't need to mention the ADA or use the phrase "reasonable accommodation." The request can be made in plain language and can consist solely of an employee asking for an adjustment or change in work for reasons related to a medical condition.



An employee who is being reprimanded for tardiness, for example, might comment that side effects of a new medication make getting to work on time difficult. The manager needs to recognize that the employee's explanation is a possible request for a reasonable accommodation, rather than a lame excuse for tardiness.

An employee may be requesting a reasonable accommodation, rather than making an excuse to explain a behavior.

The appropriate response would be to start the interactive process (and likely involve human resources) rather than to immediately impose discipline for the tardiness, but the manager may not recognize the request if that manager is passively hearing rather than actively listening. Giving an employee undivided attention isn't just a polite idea — it's a management skill that should be practiced.



#5 FAILING TO DOCUMENT

Not all employee conversations involve discipline, but they should still be documented. Often, if a manager feels like a situation only requires a brief discussion and that the event or undesirable behavior is unlikely to occur again, the manager doesn't document the encounter. However, failure to document could make it difficult to establish a history or pattern if the behavior or similar actions were to recur in the future, or if there were questions about how the situation was handled.

Further, managers may change jobs or take temporary leave. If an employee issue was addressed but never written down, a new or temporary manager might not be aware of the previous issues. Documentation can serve to refresh everyone's memory about what was discussed, the date of the conversation, and what expectations were communicated or what action plan was created.

If the discussion does involve discipline, progress may need to be monitored, and further follow-up conversations might be needed. If suspension or termination becomes necessary, the documentation will also help support those decisions.

Even if an employee conversation does not involve discipline, it should be documented.



ARE YOU EQUIPPING YOUR MANAGERS?

Effective communication skills are fundamental to appropriately handling difficult conversations with employees. Managers need to be able to address an employee relations issue directly with respect and compassion, rather than ignoring the issue or avoiding direct confrontation.

Managers should be trained to apply critical thinking skills to employee conversations. They should ask questions, aim for understanding, listen attentively, and seek solutions that benefit all stakeholders.

Managers who commit the five common mistakes discussed here are probably making other mistakes as well, and likely creating a work environment where employees don't feel comfortable raising concerns because they don't think their complaints will be taken seriously and don't believe their managers will take appropriate action to correct issues.

As an HR professional, your first step in creating a workplace that inspires employee loyalty, engagement, and retention might be a few difficult conversations with your front-line managers about their communication skills.

These conversations may be uncomfortable and even embarrassing for a manager, but they are probably more so for the employees, so managers should be taught to show compassion.



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Judy Kneiszal is an Editor on the Human Resources Publishing Team at J. J. Keller & Associates, Inc. She conducts research and creates content on a variety of HR-related topics including employee communication and discipline, background checks, discrimination, diversity and inclusion, policies and procedures, and sexual harassment prevention.

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