



Unit 1

Guidelines for Difficult Conversations

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Identify the advantages to having tough conversations
- ✓ Describe the components to an effective behavior modification conversation
- ✓ Use your organization's resources to help you deal with hygiene issues

Unit 1

Guidelines for Difficult Conversations

Let's Talk About It!

To give us some motivation for dealing with these difficult topics, let's explore some of the benefits of discussing personal hygiene.

On A Personal Note

At the root of it, you should talk to your employees about their personal hygiene issues because you care. Wouldn't you want to be treated the same way? In *101 Tough Conversations to Have with Employees*, author Paul Falcone offers this thought in a sample script: "You know how most of us would appreciate it if someone told us that we had spinach stuck in our teeth or that our zipper was down, just to save us from embarrassment? I see this as one of those conversations because even though it's difficult news to share, it's really in your best interests."

What are some attitudes that will be useful when sharing difficult news with co-workers?

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A Business Case

There are two main legislative areas that can be affected by issues with personal hygiene.

First, there is the concept of a **hostile work environment**, which is a cornerstone of harassment legislation. Let's say an employee has an issue with body odor. Sticks of deodorant are left on their desk, their cubicle is sprayed with strong perfumes, and nasty notes are left on their chair... but their supervisor doesn't directly address the issue. The employer can be seen as promoting a hostile work environment, and thereby exposing themselves to harassment lawsuits.

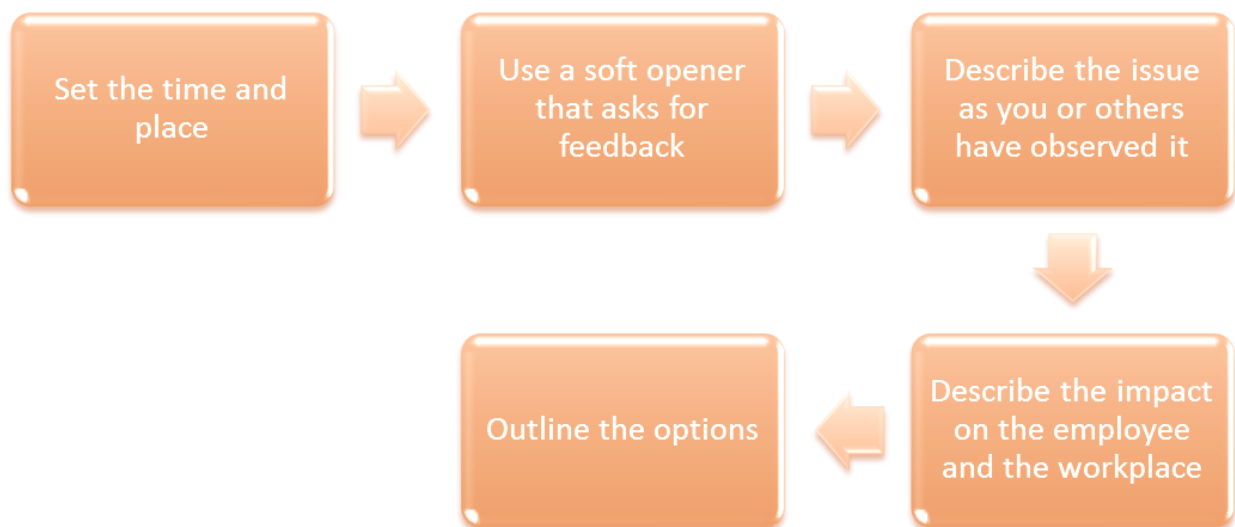
The second relates to **people with disabilities**. In most jurisdictions, employers are obliged to accommodate employees with disabilities. So, as an example, let's say a staff member has a colostomy bag that sometimes emits a strange odor. As an employer, you're obligated to work with the employee to minimize their discomfort and the discomfort of others. For example, the employee may agree that if others approach you about the odor, you can tell them that it is due to a medical condition and apologize for the inconvenience. Failure to assist the employee in this manner could mean that your company faces legal exposure.

Guidelines for Difficult Conversations

A Step-by-Step Guide

The Basic Formula

Here is a basic formula for any difficult conversation:



Step One: Set the Time and Place

Choosing the right time and place to give feedback is critical. Always ask to speak to the employee in private when they have some time to spare. With this in mind, however, try to address the issue as quickly as possible when you are made aware of it.

Invite the employee into your office (or, if you don't have an office, a private meeting room), ask them to be seated, close the door, and seat yourself.

Step Two: Use a Soft Opener that Asks for Feedback

The employee will know that something is up, so don't waste time with small chat. Your opening sentences should set the stage for the conversation, ask permission for the feedback, and let the employee know what is coming.

Example: "Robin, a sensitive issue about your hygiene [or personal appearance] has come to my attention, and I'd like your help in solving it. This will be private – I won't share anything discussed here with anyone else without your permission. Do you have a few minutes so that we can talk about this and come to a solution?"

Step Three: Describe the Issue as You or Others Have Observed It

Next, describe what is happening in objective terms. Avoid making jokes, using unnecessary adjectives (gross, smelly, nasty, etc.), or insulting the employee. However, be honest about your own feelings (concerned, uncomfortable, etc.) and be respectful.

Example: "I'm concerned about your health, and a few of your co-workers have come to me out of concern too. This is a little bit uncomfortable for me to discuss, so I'll get right to the point: we have all noticed an odor of feces around your cubicle, and we have noticed some stains on your chair."

Step Four: Describe the Impact on the Employee and the Workplace

The next part of the conversation should outline the effect that the issue is having on the individual's career.

Example: "I'm worried that this is affecting your reputation and image as a professional salesperson, both by your co-workers and your clients."

Step Five: Outline the Options

Conclude the conversation with some suggestions. Specific action items will depend on the issue being addressed, so we will give some examples with each problem that we look at today. Your final statement should be a question like, "What are your thoughts?"

Example: “I’d really like your help in dealing with this issue. If this is a medical problem, I don’t need detailed information, but we can work with Human Resources to find a solution. If you think that this is a hygiene problem, however, I’d like to brainstorm some solutions with you. Does this plan sound acceptable to you?” You can then work with the employee on solving the problem. We’ll discuss sensible solutions to common problems later on in the workshop.

Getting the Facts

Before you discuss personal matters with employees, make sure that you're prepared! You should familiarize yourself with the following information. Always have it on hand when speaking with an employee and stay on top of updates.

- Dress and hygiene code, if your company has one
- Union or legal requirements for discussing sensitive topics with employees (such as disabilities or dress-code violations)
- Policy on when to send an employee home and whether this leave is paid or non-paid
- Policies on medical leave and confidentiality
- Scents policy
- Your level of authority to issue written warnings, send employees home, and terminate staff, and who else needs to be involved in each situation

Role Play

Role play soft openings. Each person should have a chance to be the manager and the employee. You can invent hygiene issues if you desire but you should not proceed past the opening part of the conversation.

Use the space below to outline your role play.

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Overcoming Objections

Common Barriers

On paper, this looks fantastically simple: you tell the employee that you think they have a problem, they agree, and everyone goes away happy and the problem is quickly resolved.

The truth is that often employees will be so mortified that they will be more than happy to work with you to solve the problem. However, there are some common objections that you might face. We've summarized them below as well as some possible solutions.

The person becomes offended.

Often this happens because the manager holding the conversation misjudged the situation and used the wrong language and/or tone. If this happens to you, try saying, “I’m really sorry that I offended you. My intention here is to help you, not to make you feel badly about yourself or to insult you. Could we start over?”

The person won't admit that they have a problem.

This occurs most frequently with body odor issues and dress code violations. If the employee continually rejects your assessment of the issue, wrap the conversation up with a statement like this: “Blair, I appreciate your honesty in assessing this situation. I’m sorry that our perceptions are different. What I would like to do is get another opinion from human resources. I’ll get back to you within a few hours.”

If it is within your authority, you can change the person's duties until the assessment by human resources is complete. For example, if you feel that their clothing is inappropriate, you could have them work on an administrative task instead of serving customers.

Throughout this workshop, we will often suggest that you check with your human resources department for a second opinion. If you don't have a human resources department, or if they are not available at the time of the incident, then consult someone else as deemed appropriate in your company. (This might be a more senior manager, a union representative, or your legal counsel.)

The person refuses to change their hygiene habits or appearance.

The steps for dealing with this situation are similar to the above issue. If the employee flat-out refuses to change, we recommend the following approach *if it is supported by your organization!*

First, have the difficult conversation as laid out previously. If the employee refuses assistance or refuses to solve the problem, we recommend that they are sent home for the day with pay to reflect on the situation.

Set the expectation that if the situation is not resolved, they will no longer be employed by the company. While the employee is at home, discuss the situation with human resources, your legal team, and anyone else deemed appropriate. When the employee returns to work, they should immediately meet with you to discuss their decision. You can then proceed as appropriate.

Your organization does have the right to expect employees to meet a particular standard of appearance. If employees choose not to meet that standard, then they are effectively choosing not to work for your organization.

The issue reoccurs frequently.

You should document all conversations related to personal hygiene and appearance in an employee's file. It's good practice in general, particularly if the employee ever goes to work for a different manager. In the case of dress code violations, documentation can protect you against sexual harassment lawsuits. In addition, clear records will give you some backup if the employee promises to resolve the issue and then doesn't, or if the problem is solved only temporarily.

Let's take the issue of Cameron, an employee with excessive flatulence, as an example. After a conversation with you and a subsequent visit to the doctor, she began medication that solved the issue. However, you noticed on one particular occasion that the issue had returned.

For this one-time occurrence, you could take Cameron aside and say something like, "Cameron, the issue that we discussed previously about your flatulence has become an issue again. Do you know why that might be?"

Cameron might respond with something like, “I’m so embarrassed – I forgot to take my medication today.”

Your response could then be: “I’m sorry that that happened. I find this pretty embarrassing to talk about myself, so if you could remember to take your medication then we shouldn’t need to have this conversation again.”

Make sure to document the slip-up and what you did to correct it.

In a perfect world, you shouldn’t have to have the conversation again. However, let’s say the next week, you hear Cameron pass gas every time you walk by her cubicle. You should then be entitled to follow your organization’s disciplinary process for violation of the code of conduct (or other appropriate policy). Once again, your human resource department should be involved.

The person feels discriminated against because they have a disability.

If you’re having a tough conversation with an employee and they allege discrimination due to a disability, stop the conversation right away. Say something like, “I’m sorry that you feel that way. If that’s the case, however, I’ll need to step away from the issue and involve human resources. Thank you for your time. I’ll ensure that someone gets in touch with you about next steps within the next few hours.”

Once again, we’ve referred to human resources here, but there may be someone more appropriate in your organization who handles these types of issues.

Role Play

Create a role play about a hygiene issue. The manager will set the time and place, use a soft opening, describe the issue and impact, and provide solutions. The employee will make an objection which the manager must successfully respond to.

Use the space below to outline your role play.

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Further Reading:

- ✓ *Benjamin, Susan F. Perfect Phrases for Dealing with Difficult Situations at Work. McGraw-Hill, 2008.*
- ✓ *Brennan, Lynn. Business Etiquette For The 21st Century: What to Do and What NOT to Do. Piatkus Books, 2004.*
- ✓ *Chaney, Lillian Hunt, and Jeanette St. Clair Martin. The Essential Guide to Business Etiquette. Praeger Publishers, 2007.*