



Having a Difficult Discussion: A Step-by-Step Guide

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Today, good management is more essential than ever. Your success depends on the ability to attract and retain good staff. It might not be obvious, but your managers are the critical link. Consider these research findings pertaining to staff retention.

The most frequently cited reason an employee leaves is poor management and lack of career advancement.¹ 75 percent of employees surveyed stated that their manager is the worst part of their day.² 65 percent of employees surveyed said they would rather have a new manager than a pay raise.²

The quality of your managers directly impacts retention. But the skill gap between technical professionals and managers is considerable. We explored this gap in the past article, *Bridging the Gap Between the Skills You Have and the Skills You Need*, in the July 2021 *ITE Journal*. When a technical professional becomes a manager, the *entire* game changes. Analytical problem-solving works well for technical problems. Humans, however, are not an analytical problem to be solved. Motivating, relating to, and inspiring humans requires different skills. While we tend to view a management position as a promotion, the reality is that management is a career change.

Through interviews with senior leaders, managers, and work with *LeadershipITE* participants, three management skills are consistently identified as difficult for new managers (*and* many experienced managers): delegation, complex decision making (without overthinking it), and having difficult discussions. Of these top three, having difficult discussions is consistently the most dreaded and troublesome to master.

Let's explore the steps to having a difficult discussion and, while we're at it, we can appreciate the necessity of the foundational skills.

What Makes a Discussion Difficult?

Think about a difficult discussion. What is it that makes the discussion so difficult and dreaded? Sometimes the dread comes from dealing with a person perceived to be "difficult," or when there is an expectation that the conversation will be contentious and unpleasant. Often, the perception of "difficult" is from the manager herself/himself. Many of us are conditioned to avoid conflict, stay away from unwelcome topics, and not upset another person. In general, we want to be liked.

When these factors are at play, the manager must first grapple with his or her own fears and worries. Skill development can help overcome the reluctance. By enhancing skills for a difficult discussion, the manager grows in confidence. They learn how to

plan for the conversation, and they have the skills to handle the conversation in the moment.

Why Have a Difficult Discussion?

Problematic behaviors are rarely a secret. When there is a problematic behavioral or performance issue, it is noticed by others in the office. Consequently, the outcome of the discussion impacts the individual, the staff, and the organization. There's a lot at stake.

Perhaps you have noticed these impacts when a manager avoids the difficult discussion.

- The problematic behavior degrades productivity, effectiveness and/or efficiency.
- The problematic behavior negatively impacts staff relationships which can lead to a lack of collaboration, cooperation, and trust.
- Other staff pick up the slack for an underperforming employee creating stress and resentment.
- Other staff recognize that steps have *not* been taken to address the problem behavior. This leads to morale and motivation problems. After all, why should the top performer keep performing when others are allowed to slide?
- Accountability declines as problems persist.
- Over time, top performers may leave, and top candidates may avoid the manager who doesn't address performance problems.

Before the Discussion

It helps to have a plan for the difficult discussion. With preparation, your head is clear, you are confident of your skills, and you have clarity in your approach. Start with these five points.

- **Who's Here.** Take time to consider the person with whom you will have this discussion.
 - Skills: At what skills have they excelled? Where have they struggled?

Management isn't just a promotion; it's a career change.

- **Background:** What do you know about their background? Are they doing work that's new to them? Has their training and background prepared them for this role? Is retirement soon?
- **Communication style:** The better you know their communication style, the more you can adapt your approach to theirs. This makes everyone more comfortable. Think about their communication approach. Table 1 provides general clues to five communication types and ways to shift your approach.

Table 1. Communication Styles and Adaptation Options

| Communication Style Clues | Your Approach |
|---|--|
| Direct, to-the-point, goal-focused | Quickly get to the point. Be clear and direct. Provide context. Consider bullet points. |
| Chatty and personally inquisitive | Talk briefly about them personally to bring ease to the conversation. Take into account the relationship side of the issue at hand. |
| Calm, stable, and best with specific instructions | Keep your tone low key and your manner calm and relaxed. Be prepared to provide specific instructions, next steps, and a follow-up plan. |
| Needs data, analysis, and information | Be ready with specific examples of the behavior problem. Consider a two-part discussion. Finish the conversation later after they have time to think. |
| No definitive communication style | After a few minutes of discussion, ask for their input. Are you going too fast or too slow. Ask if there's a better way to continue the conversation for them. |

- **Behavior.** Identify the *behavior* that is at issue. Often, we confuse labels with behaviors. Your discussion is specifically about their behavior. For example, you may hear a staff member complain about the problem employee, "I don't want him on my team. He's so disrespectful!" "Disrespect" is a label that comes from that staff member's perception of the situation. Labels can only be changed by the perceiving person. *Behavior*, on the other hand, is under the control of the under-performing employee.

Your job is to identify the *specific problematic behavior*. After all, behavior change is the goal of the difficult discussion. For example, the under-performing person consistently misses deadlines which causes other staff to work extra hours. Missed deadlines is the behavior problem. Table 2 illustrates examples of labels and Table 3 shows examples of behaviors. Note the difference.

Table 2. Examples of Labels

| Labels |
|---------------|
| Disrespectful |
| Condescending |
| Unreliable |
| Bully |
| Difficult |
| Argumentative |
| Clueless |

Table 3. Examples of Behaviors

| Behaviors |
|--|
| Arrives late to work |
| Doesn't meet deadlines |
| Interrupts in meetings |
| Products are incomplete |
| Doesn't share relevant information with others |
| Doesn't delegate |
| Speaks in a harsh tone to staff |

- **Perception.** Having identified the behavior, its time to get clarity on *your perception* of the problem. "Perception" is the key word. It implies that there are other ways to see the situation. Acknowledge to yourself *in advance* that there are other ways to view the situation. Be honest about your perception and/or feeling about the undesirable behavior. No one can argue with your perception or your feelings, and you can't argue with theirs. You must own your perception *and be open to other viewpoints*.
- **Request.** Be clear about your request of the other person. What is the behavior change you seek? What will you request the other person do differently? Be specific. As before, your request is for a specific *behavior* change not a label change.
- **Clear, Curious, and Calm.** Your attitude sets the tone and facilitates a successful outcome. While it is important to be clear and specific about the behavior you wish to see, it's also important to be flexible. Once you are in the discussion, you may learn new information that shifts your thinking. Bring sincere curiosity to the discussion through your questions and tone. Lastly, be calm. Don't attempt a difficult discussion when you are tired. You need energy for deep listening, thoughtful responses, focus, and self-control.

Have the Difficult Discussion

Even with preparation, it's useful to have a script written or in your mind. Here's a step-by-step approach to preparing that script.

1. **State the behavior to be addressed.** State the purpose of the conversation and the specific behavior that is an issue. Recall "who's here" and adjust your communication approach for the other person.
2. **Share your perception of that behavior.** Share your perception, your interpretation, or your feeling about the behavior. Be clear that this is only your interpretation. Often the employee has little appreciation for how others see their actions or behaviors. Sharing your perception may be a new realization for them.

3. **Ask their perception.** It's important to move quickly to *their* perception. This demonstrates that you are open to hearing other viewpoints. Be sincerely curious.
4. **Discuss together.** Now the discussion starts. Good listening skills are imperative. Listen to the person, paraphrase back *your* understanding of *their* perspective. Discuss *their* perspective until the employee is satisfied that you understand their view. This helps the employee feel heard and remain calmer. Only after the employee feels that you understand *their* perception do you come back to your perception. Next, discuss discrepancies between the perceptions. It's okay that your perception shifts during the conversation.
5. **State your request.** State your request for the new behavior. Be clear on your expectations and the specific behavior that achieves that expectation. Avoid labels and stick to behavior.
6. **Review next steps.** When there is mutual understanding, ask the person to say the next steps so that you hear their understanding. This is a powerful technique that either confirms understanding or highlights discrepancies. Discrepancies are not uncommon. It's best that you know now rather than later.

Here's a template to outline your difficult discussion.

1. When you do [behavior],
2. I perceive/interpret/feel [your perception of their behavior]
3. What's your perception/interpretation/perspective?
[curiosity]
4. Discussion [with active listening]
5. Based on our discussion, I request [make your request]
6. Please share your view of the next steps [they repeat the next steps]

With the template in mind, here are several abbreviated examples of the first three steps using the template. Below that is an example that rounds out the full discussion.

Example: Interruptions

1. When you interrupt me in meetings,
2. I feel that my opinion doesn't matter,
3. Tell me about your perception.

Example: Critical questioning

1. When you question my comments and recommendations,
2. I feel that you don't trust my judgment.
3. Help me understand your perspective.

Example: Late report

1. When you don't turn in the report on time,
2. My interpretation is that maybe you don't know how to complete it or that you don't appreciate the importance of the deadline.
3. I'm curious to know your interpretation.

Example: Tardiness

1. When you don't come to work on time,

2. My perception is that either you are struggling to manage your time, or you don't take our work hours seriously.
3. I'd like to hear your take on this.

These abbreviated examples provide an outline to get you started. In a real conversation, you would have a more complete discussion. Below is an example that illustrates this.

Enrico has not been performing adequately on his individual tasks. Enrico is very friendly and knows everyone in the office. He's good at his job when he applies himself. It's your perception that work is a lower priority than socializing. To put him at ease, you allow time at the beginning for personal conversation. Your tone is friendly, calm, and easy.

***You:** Enrico, I've noticed that the last three deliverables have been late. When your deliverables are late, it causes extra work on the part of the team and puts the project at risk. I'm trying to understand the situation. You have the skills for these tasks. My perception is that you aren't managing your time well or you may not realize the seriousness of the due dates. Tell me about your perception of the situation.*

***Enrico:** Yeah...I feel bad about the late deliverables. I just don't have enough time. Since I'm single, everyone expects me to work late but it's important to me to have time outside of work. I do the best I can while I'm here.*

***You:** It sounds like it's important that you keep work hours within certain boundaries so that you have personal time. Is that right?*

***Enrico:** Exactly! I knew you'd understand!*

***You:** I may understand, but we still have deadlines. Clients pay for our work, and their business enables us to pay you and the others. Tell me about your ideas for being more efficient with your time.*

***Enrico:** Well, I'm at my desk except when I meet friends for coffee breaks and lunch and a little chatting here and there. That's just a few hours a day.*

***You:** If you had those few hours a day for the last three weeks, could the deliverables have been on time?*

***Enrico:** Probably, I guess.*

***You:** I'm not asking you to stop being friendly or taking breaks when you need one. I am asking that you minimize it. One of the characteristics of a professional is that we get our work done. Early in my career, I kept a log of my time for a month. It was a revelation that changed the way I work. That's just one idea. What can you do to better manage your time?*

Enrico: Let me think about it. So, we're good?

You: Not exactly. I need a more definitive plan. We can't miss deadlines. You create a plan, and we'll discuss your ideas tomorrow at 9 a.m. So that we're on the same page, what are you bringing to our meeting tomorrow morning?

Enrico: I don't know exactly. I guess I'll try to figure out a way to budget my time and work differently.

You: That sounds good. I look forward to the discussion.

The above discussion illustrates clarity around the behavior problem and the request. The example uses listening skills to ensure that the employee feels heard throughout the discussion. Finally, there are clear next steps that are acknowledged by the employee.

With any difficult discussion, the most important point is to have the discussion. You get better every time, and this skill pays off throughout your career. Schedule that difficult discussion now. You can do it. **itej**



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Why I Joined ITE's Mentoring Program



Bryce Grame (S)
Montana State University

Why did you want a mentor?

When I applied to have an ITE mentor, I was looking to expand my industry network and learn from someone with continued involvement in ITE as a professional. At the time, I was working on graduate school applications and was advised that mentorship could be very beneficial.

How did having a mentor help you?

Having a mentor has helped me in a number of ways. My mentor was able to provide feedback on fellowship opportunities and encouraged me to critically think about what I truly desire out of a graduate program. My mentor also helped me navigate different decisions regarding summer employment opportunities, providing seasoned industry insight about the potential benefits of respective positions that I was considering.

What was the most surprising thing that Bryce learned through his experience? Read his blog here: <https://bit.ly/3BMMeXT>

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