

Harmony Alliance Guides:
Project Talent Management

A Primer to Difficult Conversations



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Difficult Times Even More Difficult Conversations

In challenging times, organisations often face tough decisions that lead to difficult discussions with staff. Whether it's communicating redundancies or addressing performance issues, preparing and delivering these conversations with care and confidence is crucial. This guide is designed to help grassroots organisations, social enterprises, and small start-ups navigate these tough discussions while preserving the dignity of staff and enabling managers to fulfil their responsibilities.

If the conversation involves a redundancy, it is essential to follow the proper procedures as outlined by Fair Work Australia. This guide does not replace or override those processes but aims to help make the conversation more comfortable for everyone involved. Always seek professional advice when necessary.

Preparation

Effective preparation is critical to managing difficult conversations. These discussions typically fall into two categories:

1. Communicating a decision: e.g., redundancy or organisational changes.
2. Addressing a workplace issue: e.g., performance concerns.

Follow these steps to prepare:

1. Ensure clarity:

- › Confirm the decision has been carefully considered, all alternatives explored, and the rationale is clear. Ensure senior managers fully support the decision.

2. Document the facts:

- › Write down the facts and your feelings about the situation.

3. Consider the staff member's perspective:

- › Reflect on how the staff member might view the situation and what emotions they may experience (e.g., sadness, frustration, anger).

4. Draft the conversation:

- › For redundancies, ensure the script adheres to Fair Work Australia guidelines.
- › For performance issues, focus on understanding the problem by planning open-ended questions (e.g., "Can you share your perspective on this situation?") followed by more targeted questions.

5. Choose the right setting:

- › Pick a private, quiet location at an appropriate time. Avoid public spaces or times when interruptions are likely.

6. Prepare for the unexpected:

- › Avoid assuming how the staff member will react. Stay flexible and ready to adapt.

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During the Conversation

General Tips

1. Start with an open question:

- › Begin with something neutral, like, "How are you feeling today?"

2. Stay composed:

- › Avoid becoming emotional or defensive. Maintain professionalism.

3. Take ownership:

- › Do not blame others (e.g., "This wasn't my decision"). Instead, own the conversation and the decision.

4. Practice active listening:

- › Remove distractions: Give your full attention.
- › Maintain eye contact: Show engagement.
- › Use non-verbal cues: Nod or lean forward slightly.
- › Paraphrase: Reflect their words back to ensure understanding.
- › Encourage dialogue: Use prompts like "Go on," or "I understand."

5. Use SOLER body language:

- › **S**it squarely facing them.
- › **O**pen posture (avoid crossing arms).
- › **L**ean slightly forward to show interest.
- › **E**stablish consistent eye contact.
- › **R**elax to create a supportive atmosphere.

For Redundancy Discussions

- **Show empathy:** Acknowledge their feelings but avoid saying, "I know how you feel," as it may come across as insincere.
- **Be direct and concise:** Avoid small talk or sugar-coating. Communicate the decision clearly and compassionately.
- **Check-in periodically:** Ask, "Are you okay to continue?" if they seem overwhelmed.
- **Avoid certain pitfalls:**
 - › Don't negotiate or backtrack.
 - › Don't offer advice about what they should do next.
 - › Don't provide false hope.
 - › Avoid humour or attempts to lighten the mood.



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Ending the Conversation – Next Steps

1. Summarise the discussion:

- › Recap key points to ensure clarity.

2. Focus on the next steps:

- › Provide clear guidance on what will happen next (e.g., final payments, follow-up meetings).

3. Offer follow-up support:

- › Understand that receiving bad news can hinder immediate decision-making. Offer a mechanism for the staff member to ask questions or seek clarification later.

By preparing thoroughly, maintaining professionalism during the discussion, and offering clear next steps, managers can handle difficult conversations with care, compassion, and confidence.

Other Harmony Alliance Guides in the Talent Management Series

- Defining Talent Management
- Performance Management

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