



Tough Conversations: How to Say What's Necessary - Without Becoming the “Bad Guy”

Human resources teams handle some of the most emotionally charged conflicts in an employment relationship. From salary negotiations to policy enforcement to terminations, the ability to have tough conversations tactfully is a must.

In this eBook, you'll learn:

- Why diplomacy and tact are essential for HR.
- How to handle tough conversations tactfully.
- Specific tips for navigating common sources of HR conflict.
- Where to find additional help.

Disclaimer: The contents of this eBook are for general informational purposes only. They are not intended as legal advice and should not be construed as such. If you have specific legal questions, consult an attorney licensed to practice in your jurisdiction.

Why Diplomacy and Tact Matter

Human resources professionals often find themselves in the middle of tough conversations. Their role is to handle interpersonal conflicts, negotiate with candidates and employees, and deliver difficult news.

HR staff who can do these tasks with tact and diplomacy are more successful than those who cannot. Other essential skills that support diplomacy and tact include:

- **Organization.** Defusing emotional tensions often requires a focus on the issue at hand. To maintain this focus, HR professionals need a clear, organized record.
- **Listening.** The ability to listen without judgment is a must. Listening allows you to better understand an employee's perspective and seek a solution the employee embraces as their own.
- **Confidentiality.** Some HR work is governed by confidentiality laws or regulations. Developing a reputation as a confidante, however, helps ensure employees trust you. When trust exists, staff are more likely to believe you when you deliver hard news, like "Your performance is lagging behind your co-workers'."



Laying the Groundwork for Diplomatic Conversations

Some methods apply to nearly every tough conversation in the workplace. To prepare for any potential conflict:

- **Act promptly.** Reach out and schedule a meeting as soon as you realize a conversation is necessary.
- **Don't poke the bear.** Describe the reason for the meeting in neutral terms: "Let's meet to talk about your performance."
- **Stake out neutral territory.** Choose a private, neutral location to have the conversation, such as a meeting or conference room.
- **Document everything.** Keep a log of efforts to reach the employee and schedule a meeting, particularly if you have to do so more than once. Make copies of supporting documentation or evidence and maintain them in a central location.



Tact 101

Starting a tough conversation can be as difficult as having it. Throughout the conversation:

- **Be direct.** If you're bringing up a problem, state it clearly, then provide evidence to back up that statement.
- **Focus on the issue, not the person.** An employee should leave the meeting knowing (1) what the problem is, (2) what to do to solve it, and (3) what will happen if the problem is not solved.
- **Listen and focus.** Give the employee a chance to tell their side of the story. You'll increase their chances of accepting a proposed solution, and you may uncover information that will allow you to craft a more effective response to the issue.

On the following pages, you'll find practical ideas to handle a wide range of tough conversations tactfully and effectively – without becoming the “bad guy.”



Salary/Raise Negotiations

Proactive employees are a good thing – but sometimes, these workers seek raises that simply aren't justified. To handle the situation tactfully:

- **Put data at the center.** A raise negotiation is all about placing a dollar amount on the value an employee contributes to the business. Base your side of the conversation on the numbers.
- **Build a performance plan.** To soften the blow of a “no,” work with the employee to create a plan that will allow them to build their skills and add the necessary value to justify a raise.
- **Think long term.** An employee seeking a raise may not realize there are more effective ways to reach the same goal, such as by stepping into a specialist role. Help the employee think more globally in order to help them reach their goal in a way that benefits the company – even if it means you have to say “no” to today's raise request.



Performance Evaluations and Demotions

Performance evaluations can be nerve-wracking for employees, especially if they know (or suspect) they're about to be criticized or demoted. To navigate this territory well:

- **Avoid absolutes.** “You always” or “you never” is language that sets your employee on the defensive, searching for a single counterexample to prove you wrong. Instead of absolutes, use specific examples: “According to your timesheets, you were late eight times in February and only once in January.”
- **Ask for the employee’s point of view.** “Why is this happening?” and “How can we change this?” engage the employee in the conversation and help align you and the employee as collaborators, rather than adversaries.
- **Provide concrete solutions.** Give employees specific steps they can take to correct an issue. If you’re demoting a worker, give them a clear path back to the job they’re leaving.



Dress Code Violations

Dress code violations can be sensitive territory. How we dress is often an expression of our personality; being criticized for it can feel personal, even when it isn't.

To handle dress code conversations effectively:

- **Stick to the language of the policy.** There should be a clear disconnect between the rules and what your employee is wearing. For instance, the policy may state “no open-toed shoes,” while your employee stands before you in sandals.
- **Don't be the fashion police.** Dress codes typically exist to protect safety and health, project a certain image, or both. When addressing a violation, focus on these aspects, rather than on subjective style or fashion choices. For instance, “Sandals aren't acceptable because we don't want you to suffer a foot injury” is more effective than “Sandals are ugly with a suit and tie.”
- **Escalate consequences for repeat offenders if needed.** If an employee continually violates the dress code despite repeated warnings, talk to senior management or legal counsel to discuss further options.



Personal Hygiene

Addressing a worker's personal hygiene can feel intensely personal. Rather than avoiding the conversation, take these steps to handle it diplomatically:

- **Gather your own evidence.** "Susie stinks!" is a subjective statement. Try to observe the situation to determine whether there's a legitimate need to address hygiene.
- **Use "I" statements.** "I want to discuss a potentially sensitive topic with you." "I've noticed that your clothes are often dirty." The employee may be unaware an issue exists, so focus on what you've seen, rather than on their behavior.
- **Review the dress code or grooming policy.** Drawing a clear connection between the policy and the employee's current state of grooming can help the employee understand the issue and how to correct it.
- **Work with the employee to solve the problem,** bearing in mind that the issue may require accommodation under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), or an applicable state law.



Inter-Employee Conflicts

Interpersonal conflicts are inevitable on teams, but they don't have to derail productivity. Here's how to address them effectively:

- **Address the problem directly (but discreetly).** Pull conflicting employees into your office or a neutral, private space – but then, state the problem directly. “I understand you two disagree on how to handle the Jones account.”
- **Model and teach active listening.** Show your staff how to listen, rephrase what they've heard, and respond to it. Encourage workers to take the other's perspective, even if they disagree.
- **Focus on the issue, not the emotions.** Conflicts can raise tensions, anger and frustration. Defuse these by focusing on the problem and recruiting both sides of a conflict to solve it together.



Ending the Employment Relationship

Firing and layoffs are tough for employees, even when they're a relief for managers. To handle this conversation diplomatically:

- **Gather your evidence.** Most employment relationships in the U.S. are “at-will,” but there are prohibited reasons to fire an employee, including discrimination, whistleblowing or an employee exercising a legal right. Make sure you have the evidence you need to demonstrate the firing did not occur for one of these reasons.
- **Make firing your last choice, not your first.** Give the employee a warning and a chance to change their behavior before making the firing decision. Only fire without warning if the employee’s behavior was particularly egregious or dangerous, such as committing a crime while at work.
- **Have the conversation face to face.** The meeting doesn’t have to be long, but it does have to be in person. Include a third party as a witness – another HR staff member is often a good choice.



Where to Go for Help

Need help having a tough conversation – or finding employees who seek to address tough problems before you do? Talk to a staffing partner.

Your staffing firm can:

- **Help you review and clarify key policies.**
- **Find the right people for your team.**
- **Take on the role of employer for contingent workers.**



Making a Culture Connection

Conflicts can arise when an employee's approach to work doesn't fit with the vision, goals or daily routines of your existing team.

Staffing partners help build culture connections by:

- considering each candidate's approach to work as well as their skills,
- recommending candidates who approach work the way your team does, and
- aligning skill demands so your interviewing can focus on cultural fit.



Employer Responsibilities and Contract Staff

Being the employer of record can be tough, especially when it comes to conflict-ripe conversations. One solution is to work with a staffing firm that provides qualified temporary staff for key projects and positions.

When you work with a staffing firm:

- **Your staffing partner is the employer of record – making them responsible for tough conversations about policy compliance, promotion/demotion, or firing.**
- **You can build a relationship with a potential employee before making the decision to hire them long term.**
- **You can find the temporary staff you need for seasonal rush periods or specialized projects.**

