

# CONSUMER MANAGEMENT TIPS

## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS, MANAGING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

---

### CONVERSATIONS WHERE CORRECTIVE ACTION IS NEEDED AND HOW TO MANAGE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

When having a conversation with someone, it is important to recognize that the tone of your voice, the energy you emit and your body language are just as important as the words you choose. The point of a conversation is to relay your message (thoughts, ideas, how you feel about something) to the person you are talking with in a way that they hear and understand precisely what you are saying.

Modern technology dictates that there are alternative ways to communicate to others – texting, instant messaging, email, Facebook, twitter and more, but nothing replaces face to face conversation. I'm a strict believer that, with few exceptions, almost all difficult conversations should be done through a face to face conversation. There are times when emailing or texting might be an option, but I would certainly lean towards telling someone something difficult to hear in a person to person conversation. You will have firsthand knowledge of their reactions, you will be able to explain things immediately, and you will not appear as someone who cannot face an employee and hides behind a text message.

Easier said than done (no pun intended!).

So here are a few tips/ reminders when you converse with your employees.

### MANAGING CORRECTIVE ACTION CONVERSATIONS:

If the conversation involves something that is negative in nature like a corrective action request (i.e. worker not doing something the way you have instructed them to do it), one of the most effective ways to manage that conversation is as follows:

**1. Always start the conversation with something positive:**

I just wanted to thank you, Don, for always taking the time to make sure things get put in the proper place every time you work...it makes my life so much easier when I don't have to go looking for things and I know exactly where everything is...I really appreciate that you have such great attention to organization.

**2. Then discuss the negative:**

You know, Don, there is one thing that I would like to have done differently than how you are doing it...and I know this sounds picky, but if you could please remember to fold the clean laundry as soon as you take it out of the dryer, that way my clothes aren't all wrinkled. When my clean clothes sit in the laundry basket right out of the dryer, even for a short period of time, they get pretty wrinkled. I am not into ironing things, trust me on this one and I'd rather not look like I slept in my clothes all night...sound like a reasonable request, Don?

(Adding a lightness or humor to the negative is sometimes helpful)

**3. Always end on a positive note:**

Thanks for making this change easy, Don. I hope you know I value your opinion and if you have

a better way of doing things, please just talk to me...I'm open to suggestions on how to make things easier for us both. And know once again that I very much appreciate all you do for me...

**MANAGING A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION:**

A conversation involves at least two people, so there are at least 2 people, each with their own point of view on the topic being discussed. Emotions, reactions, misunderstandings, wrong choice of words and tone of the conversation can turn any discussion into an awkward, difficult, uneasy and non-productive moment. Taking time to manage a difficult conversation ahead of time is your best bet on a positive outcome. Here are a few ways to manage a difficult conversation:

**LIMIT DISTRACTIONS:** When having a conversation with someone it is best if you have no distractions. Plan ahead if possible – turn the TV, radio or music off, put the pets where they won't interfere, shut cell phones off or put in silent mode (not vibrate mode-vibrating is just as distracting as sound), invite only the people who are involved into the conversation and ask others for privacy (another room, outdoors) if possible. Having extra people around who are not part of the conversation invites uneasiness, unwanted opinions and possibly HIPPA issues.

**WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE:** Body language, for starters! Arms should be loose and uncrossed. All parties in the conversation should be at eye level or as close to eye level with each other as possible – not one person towering over the other. Keep personal space between you - getting too close to someone (invading someone else's personal space) can be viewed as threatening or a challenge. Try some deep breaths before the conversation starts to bring calmness. Shake off negativity and replace with calm assertive energy. Do not use harsh words, profanity, labeling or degrading words. Watch your tonality.

**START WITH A CLEAN SLATE:** As much as we try not to, when we have been thinking about something that needs discussion with another person, good, bad, or indifferent, we usually have the conversation and possible outcomes played out in our minds well ahead of the actual conversation taking place. Preconceived notions of a conversation can preclude a better outcome (you get what you think you are going to get). Remove those thoughts from your head and start with a clean slate...it makes it much easier to hear and understand someone when you do not think you already know what they are going to say.

**GET TO THE POINT:** Start the conversation in a neutral tone of voice, keeping emotions out of the way and be as precise and to the point as you can be without drama, opinions or negativity – “The POINT, Sherman, get to the POINT!”

**INVITE INVOLVEMENT:** During a conversation you should not feel like you are talking to a wall. Walls don't listen and they don't talk back either. Invite involvement into the conversation by asking questions of the person you are talking with. It doesn't have to be questions about the main topic you want to discuss at the beginning of the conversation – ask about the weather, traffic, family, pets...things that will allow the other person to relax and start talking to you. Once you are both in a positive mindset, the conversation should flow naturally into what you want it to be about.

**LISTEN:** Make sure you listen to the person speaking. That bears repeating - Make sure you listen to the person speaking and you are hearing what they are saying. “What did you just say?” is not always the best question to ask in a one on one conversation, unless the person you are talking with is soft spoken and you really could not hear them.

**UNDERSTAND:** You will glean nothing out of a conversation if all you are focused to is what you are saying, your own point of view and how you are feeling. Stop the focus on yourself, take a deep breath, refocus on the person talking (ask them to repeat if necessary) then listen to and try your best to understand what that other person is saying.

**REPEAT:** It is always helpful if you repeat what they said in your own words: “ So what I hear you saying Mary, is that you think...” that way, when Mary hears what you think she said, you will know if that is correct or not...trust me, she will tell you if you heard her correctly or not!

**COUNTERPOINT:** Once you have heard, understood and processed the other person’s point of view you can now make an informed decision and move forward with your counterpoint and the rest of the conversation. Again, keep emotions out, stay to your point and explain why you have made this decision.

**ASK THE QUESTION:** It is important that the person you are talking to understands what you have said as well-don’t be afraid to ask them to repeat what it is they thought you said. Also, ask them if they have a clear understanding of what it is you are communicating - you’ll be surprised at how many get this wrong. Repeat as necessary – it’s usually better to try a different way of saying what you want them to hear than to repeat the same thing over again. And because this is a conversation, not a lecture, ask them for their input, thoughts, ideas and maybe even their opinion...

What did you say? 😊

What do you think I said? 😊

Who’s on first? 😊