

Handling Difficult Conversations with Employees

Inevitably, there are when it is necessary to have a difficult conversation with an employee or a group of employees.

Principals who delay or avoid tackling a difficult conversation almost always end up in a situation where that inaction has exacerbated the issue.

Whether it's a performance issue or conflict between employees, there comes a time when principals must intervene.

It's tempting for principals to brush the issue under the rug - often because the principal isn't confident about how to handle the situation or deal with emotional employees.

The longer you wait, the more it can affect working relationships, the school environment and even the operation of the school.

Following the steps below will enable you to nip potential problems in the bud and ensure that your staff are aware of your and your board's expectations.

1. Conquer your reluctance to act

Generally speaking, no one likes conflict.

Principals can be hesitant to engage in difficult conversations because they're not sure how to approach their employees. Often, principals avoid the conversation because they think it won't go well and employees will become upset.

A difficult conversation may be necessitated by a concern over a staff member's performance or competency, unacceptable behaviour or some level of inter-staff conflict. None of these situations are likely to resolve themselves satisfactorily without an intervention.

You have to consider that staff members may not be aware how their behaviours affect the colleagues and students around them. They may not appreciate that shortcomings in their practice may be impacting on students. Ultimately, your willingness to raise your concerns in a timely and constructive way will often benefit the employee(s) concerned directly.

2. Do your homework

The more you prepare, the better the meeting should go.

You don't want to call a staff member into a meeting and raise your concerns based solely on your observations or suspicions. You need as much evidence as possible. If you don't do your homework before the meeting with the staff member, you won't

be in a position to help your staff member's growth and/or address an area of concern. Having fact-based evidence leaves less room for interpretation.

Remember that as the school's professional leader, you're also a mentor. It's up to you to provide everything your staff need to succeed. You should be able to outline expectations and explain the changes in performance or behaviour that you need to see.

If the meeting with a staff member is in response to a parental complain of some form, make sure that you have clarified with the complainant what exactly their concern is and what evidence they have to substantiate their complaint or concern. Remember that, in these circumstances, your first meeting with your employee is just about getting their side of the story.

It's important to have policies in place for certain situations. For example, if you have an employee who is frequently dressing inappropriately for the classroom, make sure you have a clear policy and that you have made staff aware of it. Have your staff read and sign that they understand the policy. It's difficult to enforce rules and guidelines if they were never set and shared with staff in the first place.

Refer to the chapter in this Principals Kit on *Inter-Staff Conflict* if you have staff members coming to you with complaints about one another.

3. Be positive

It's important to set a positive tone going into your meeting. If you have a negative approach, your staff member is more likely to get defensive and argumentative.

Give her/him examples of positive things they can do to improve. Don't just tell them what they are doing wrong. Provide them with the tools and resources necessary for improvement.

Every situation is different. Put yourself in their shoes. How would you like concerns raised with you?

Pitch your anticipated conversation as a constructive discussion. Unless you believe that you are in a situation where the issue is potentially disciplinary, avoid language that may suggest disciplinary outcomes. You don't want your employees to feel like they're in trouble. Otherwise, they'll have the mentality that they're on an inevitable path to termination and lose motivation for their job.

Ask your questions with a positive approach to open the lines of communication and have a coaching conversation. Set the tone for the meeting to be based on an open dialogue.

Always end the meeting on a positive note. Your employee should leave thinking they can do better. You want them to feel accountable for their behaviour and committed to meeting their goals.

4. Leave your emotions at the door

These meetings can easily become emotionally-charged, so you should make a strong effort to keep your own feelings in check. Your meetings should always be fact-based.

Avoid saying “I’m disappointed” or “I think that...”. Doing so only adds biased emotional elements to the conversation and suggests pre-judgment. These meetings are about finding solutions. Your responsibility is both to clarify expectations and to be supportive and constructive.

If the emotional levels rise for either party, pause the meeting and ask to reschedule. It’s essential to navigate these situations carefully. Pressing on with conversations when either party is clearly escalating will seldom result in a positive or constructive outcome.

5. Find the right setting

By identifying the right setting, you’re helping set the tone of the meeting. When asking a staff member to meet with you, do so in a manner where that person’s mana is protected and ensure that your communication is restricted to yourself and the employee. Requesting someone to come to your office to meet with you when you are in a public space like the staff room is not appropriate.

Depending on the situation, your office is usually an acceptable location for the conversation but be aware that it may also carry connotations of calling an employee into a space which denotes that they are in trouble.

It may be more constructive to talk to the teacher or support staff in a neutral space – their classroom or the board’s meeting room (provided it’s at a time when other staff are not around) for example.

In any case, choose a safe environment that makes everyone feel comfortable.

6. Should the employee have a representative with them?

This is entirely up to the employee. Often, the NZEI Te Riu Roa worksite representative will take on this role. In those circumstances, be clear about the confidentiality of the meeting and ensure that all present have the same understandings of any agreements or next steps agreed during the meeting.

If you plan to have someone else with you, e.g. the deputy principal, make sure that you advise the employee of this in advance. Be clear with the person in attendance what your expectations are of them as a participant in the process.

If you are addressing a situation which may evolve into a disciplinary matter, you must advise the employee of their right to have a representative or support person with them for the meeting.

7. Be consistent

Hold all your staff accountable to the same performance expectations.

Have the same dialogue with anyone who is slipping. You don't want to make it seem like you're alienating or picking on a certain group or individual.

With the right preparation, you should be able to refer back to the facts to explain why you're having the meeting. This will counter any concerns your staff member(s) may have about being singled out.

8. Keep it confidential

Any employees who aren't involved shouldn't be aware of the situation.

If a staff member comes to you "confidentially" to complain about a colleague, make sure they understand you cannot guarantee 100 percent confidentiality. Depending on what they disclose, you may have a responsibility to take action or speak to others.

Use your staff members' complaint, first-hand accounts from any witnesses and the facts to determine what actually occurred. Your first step is to tell your employee that you've received feedback regarding their behaviour. Remember, however, that if you are seeking other "witnesses" to a situation, this must be done in a manner that preserves the confidentiality of the issue at hand as much as possible.

Do not form a judgement until you have heard all sides of the story. There are often three sides to these situations: the version of the staff member who complained, that of the staff member who was complained about and the truth.

9. Review the situation

Lastly, once you've had the initial conversation and the situation has begun to resolve or improve, schedule a follow up meeting. Your perception that the issue has been satisfactorily resolved may not tally with the view of the staff member. The follow up meeting is important to ensure all parties are on the same page.

This meeting will also demonstrate that you are there to continue to support the staff member even after the initial problem was solved.