

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS 101: ROLE PLAY SCENARIOS

Practice often makes perfect, particularly when you are preparing for something as challenging as a difficult conversation. The following three role plays each cover a different difficult conversation scenario for you to practise with a colleague. This is a good exercise to do if you know that you (or a colleague) have a conversation coming up that you are nervous or concerned about.

Using this exercise:

1. Select the scenario you and your colleague would like to role play, or use all three.
2. Find a quiet location to perform the role plays, so that you don't feel inhibited.
3. Decide who will play the manager and who will play the team member. It is a good idea to alternate so that you both get a sense of what it's like to be on both sides of a difficult conversation. Read the relevant perspective guide for the role you are playing.
4. Don't be too over-the-top! Aim for realism, not drama. And if you play the team member, don't make things easy for the manager or it won't be a useful exercise.
5. Feel free to amend some of the specifics of these scenarios so that they are more directly relevant to the situation that you are personally facing.

Scenario 1: Manager role

You have recently taken over a new team at work. It was difficult at first because they were a tight knit bunch who loved their old manager, who was made redundant. However, you have worked hard to win their trust by being a fair and approachable manager.

The team appreciate that you have taken the time to work hard to get to know them, and you seem like a committed manager. You're proud that you've been able to win them around. Things are going well.

A new shift pattern has recently been introduced to certain parts of the organisation. Your team will be unaffected, it would appear, which is just as well. You have heard Reeta, by far the most vocal member of the team, riling up the others saying how dreadful and how unacceptable a new shift pattern would be. They didn't seem that bothered about it until she started.

Reeta demands assurances from you that the team will not have their shifts changed. You state quite clearly that you cannot give these assurances but, as far as you've heard, the shift pattern will remain as is.

The phone goes one morning. It's your boss with the news you have been dreading – following the initial roll-out of the shift pattern, it is now being introduced to your team. They're going to be extremely unhappy! After all your hard work to get them on side, too.

You book a room, gather them together, and prepare to give them the news ...

How do you take the conversation forward? How do you deal with the inevitable negative responses?

Scenario 1: Team member role

You have worked at your organisation for twenty years, and have been in your current team for seven. You've always loved your work, but things have changed a bit recently.

For the past few years you had a great manager, Harry. He was fantastic, a real character, but was recently made redundant. You now have a new manager, Florence. She's OK, but she tries a bit too hard. She's nice enough, is clearly committed to her role, and has some good ideas, but she's a bit of a jobsworth. She's a bit annoying, truth be told.

There have been rumours that the new shift pattern that has been implemented in the other parts of the organisation is heading the way of your team. It will involve night shift work, and that's not on. You've already voiced your displeasure at this to Florence, who has assured you that there will be no change to the shift pattern.

The rest of the team have said to you that they expect you to speak on their behalf should the worst come to the worst.

One morning, Florence calls the team together in a room. This had better not be the news you think is it...

Scenario 2: Manager role

You have recently recruited two new members to your team, Jacques and Stephen. Both excelled at interview and provided ample evidence that they had the competencies required for the role. You are very excited about these appointments, as you see this as an opportunity to plug some of the skills gaps in your team. The availability of additional staffing resources will also help ensure the service provided by your team is further enhanced and allow projects which have had to be put on hold due to pressures and priorities of work to commence.

You invest a significant amount of time in Jacques' and Stephen's induction, making sure they are fully familiar with how the organisation and your team operate. You agree their probationary period objectives with them at the outset and arrange a programme of on-job training for them. Each month, you meet with them individually to review their progress.

After the first four months, Jacques has settled in extremely well and you are delighted with his performance. He is exceeding your expectations and other managers have commented very favourably about him.

Stephen, however, is a different story. He just does not seem to be getting to grips with the requirements of the role at all, despite on-job training and coaching. He is making a lot of errors in his work, which colleagues have picked up on and are correcting. Some clearly resent this additional burden on their already heavy workloads and this is evident in their interactions with Stephen.

You sense tension in the team. You are aware that if colleagues were not spotting these errors and rectifying them, service to customers would be greatly affected and the reputation of your office would be damaged. Stephen also struggles to meet set deadlines but does not alert you to the fact that work will not be completed on time until it is too late for you to do anything about it. As a result, your line manager has asked you for an explanation as to why particular activities have not been completed. Stephen's appointment is proving more of a hindrance than a help.

You have avoided raising these issues with Stephen at his monthly probation meetings thus far, as you have been minded that he will improve with time. These improvements have not materialised and you know that as a result of the impact this is having on the service and the wider team, you have to raise it with him at his next review meeting. You cannot allow the situation to further escalate.

How will you prepare for this meeting? What information do you need to convey to Stephen?

Scenario 2: Team member role

Alongside another member of staff, Jacques, you recently started a new job. Your arrival was heralded with great fanfare by your manager, Christine. 'We so need your skills. You'll be a fantastic addition to the team.' So, no pressure then!

A few months on and things are becoming unbearable. Your training has been lousy - you've just been expected to get on with things because 'you've done this kind of thing before'. It's true that you have performed this kind of role elsewhere, but using different systems and protocols. This place feels completely different.

You have tried asking for help, but half the time you get waved away or told to ask someone else. You've decided that you're as well not bothering now, and might as well just muddle through. Things are not helped by the fact that Jacques, who you like very much, has taken to the job like a duck to water.

In fact, Jacques is the only one that really talks to you anymore. Everyone else seems very guarded around you. You're not sure why. Yes, you've made a few mistakes, but you're still the new boy. Surely that's allowed?

Besides, if there was really a problem Christine would have mentioned it at your regular probationary meeting. But she's never said a word. If she tries to make an issue of it now, you'll tell her exactly how little support you've had – especially from George, who is meant to be your supervisor. That's a joke! You've had barely a kind word off of him. He just grunts instructions and then sticks his head back into his PC.

It's now time for your next probation meeting. Come to think of it, it's probably time to get a few things off your chest...

Scenario 3: Manager role

Nicole is the latest addition to your team and was recruited from out with the organisation. She has immediately made a favourable impression and brought a lot of energy and fresh ideas to the office. Simon, your office head, has commented that she is 'a real find' and you are satisfied the right person has been recruited to the post.

Another member of your staff, Colin, is not so happy about Nicole's appointment. Colin also applied for the post and although he did well at interview and has potential, Nicole was the better candidate. Colin was visibly shocked when told he has been unsuccessful and so you get the impression he had thought the job was 'his'. You suggested Colin would benefit from post-interview feedback but he rejected this option outright.

Colin's bitter disappointment is now beginning to manifest itself in various ways. His motivation is clearly low and this is evident through the reduced quality of his work and his general attitude. Previously, he was a bit of a perfectionist who took great pride in his work. He now seems indifferent.

You are also worried about his hostile behaviour towards Nicole, although this is very subtle. He has definitely not gone out of his way to welcome his new colleague or support her in familiarising herself with her new working environment which is very different to the way he has behaved towards new colleagues in the past. He is polite to Nicole but does not speak to her other than when this is strictly necessary. Colin has a wealth of knowledge on how the office and indeed the wider organisation work but does not volunteer any of this information to Nicole in situations where it would clearly have benefited her. At other times he boasts loudly to colleagues within Nicole's earshot about aspects of her organisational knowledge, his general popularity and details of compliments she has received from customers. You are also very disappointed that Colin and other team member, Louisa, leave the office every day to go for lunch and have never asked Nicole to join them.

You do not find Colin's behaviour or his current performance acceptable and know you need to address this. The last thing you want is for Nicole to regret her decision to join the organisation.

Why do you think Colin is behaving this way? Could you have done anything earlier to prevent this situation? What are you going to say to Colin? Do you need to have a discussion with Nicole?

Scenario 3: Team member role

So, there you are: five years service; worked your socks off; garnered a wealth of knowledge of just about every single process in the team; and everyone thinks you're a real character.

A new job comes up. A promotion. And do you get it? No, you most certainly do not. You gave a great interview, you know you did, and they still go and hire outside of the company. If this girl they've hired, Nicole, has skills that you don't have, then you can't see them. Apparently, you can get feedback on your interview, but what's the point? If you haven't done enough to prove yourself by this time, then you never will, to your mind.

Well, if that's the thanks you get for all the work you've put into this place, then so be it. You'll just put your head down and get on with your job. You're good at your job, and enjoy it. You just know now not to expect any decent recognition or reward for it.

In fact, if you didn't have your lunch time letting off steam sessions with Louisa, you'd probably explode! Nicole has asked to join you a few times, but you've had to think of an excuse to say no. Lunch time is your time. Sure, you'll continue to be civil to people at work, but making friends hasn't got you anywhere.

Your manager, Ross, has asked to have a word with you about something. What now?