

Managing Difficult Conversations



A Guide for School Leaders

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Difficult Conversations

One of the skills of a school leader is to be able to have difficult conversations. Such conversations might involve a teaching colleague or another member of school staff, a parent, or a contact within the education authority. Handled effectively, this conversation would improve a situation that is having a negative impact on the school. But some school leaders put off having a crucial conversation because they are reluctant to tackle the issue. It may be that such a leader:

- dislikes confrontation, particularly if the other person is assertive or aggressive
- suspects that the person will take the conversation badly and it will damage the relationship
- has already tried before and it went badly
- fears that addressing the issue will only make the situation worse
- has to give disappointing or bad news
- has not followed agreed procedures or has made a mistake
- fears losing the respect of staff or the school community
- doesn't have sufficient knowledge of the issue
- fears being criticised for how they are handling this situation
- doesn't want to admit that they are wrong
- recognises that disciplinary action may be an outcome

Any of these reasons can make it easier to put the conversation off. Meanwhile the offending individual continues to provide substandard performance, engage in interpersonal conflicts and exhibit unacceptable behavior.

Handling the difficult conversation requires skill and empathy, but ultimately, it requires the courage to go ahead and do it. The more you get into the habit of facing difficult conversations, the more adept you will become at it.

Here are 10 tips for managing difficult conversations.

Managing Difficult Conversations - a Guide for School Leaders

1. Be clear about the issue

To prepare for the conversation, you need to ask yourself two important questions: 'What exactly is the behavior that is causing the problem?' and 'What impact is the behavior having?' (on you, the team, the school, on learners). You need to be clear so you can stay focused on the central issue and not get derailed. Be clear about what you want to accomplish with the conversation? What is the desired outcome? Once you have determined this, plan how you will close the conversation so that it ends with clear actions. Identify what you want the person to agree to do and what support you committed to provide.

2. Adopt a mindset of inquiry

It pays to approach such a conversation with the right mindset - which is one of inquiry. Be open to hear first what the other person has to say before reaching closure in your mind. Allow the person to let them put their side of the story. A good leader remains open and seeks to gain a better understanding of the situation. Be willing and open to finding a different solution than the one you have identified.

3. Manage emotions

It is your responsibility as a leader to understand and manage the emotions in the discussion. Avoid escalating the problem by treating the person with respect, even you totally disagree with them. Be aware that the conversation might generate a range of reactions including annoyance, anger, withdrawal and, in some cases, tears. Also, spend a little time reflecting on your attitude toward the situation and the person involved. Are you more emotional than the situation warrants? Is there some personal history of yours that is being triggered? You need to consider if some of the heightened emotional state has to do with you. No matter how well the conversation begins, you'll need to stay in charge of your own emotions and your purpose. Stay calm, breathe, and remain centred. This will help the other person too.

4. Preserve the relationship

Take care to limit any collateral damage to a relationship. It takes years to build bridges with people and only minutes to destroy them. Think about how the conversation can fix the situation, without erecting an irreparable wall between you and the person. You should remain as equals and talk things through in a mature manner rather than behaving like a parent and telling the person how it is and then acting in a comforting manner if they're upset or in a disciplinary manner if they're being aggressive. It's important to preserve a positive working relationship going forward and also means the person feels that they are respected and being treated fairly.

5. Watch your body language

Research shows that communication is not just what we say. It is estimated that communication is:

- 7% words
- 38% tone of voice
- 55% body language

When dealing with any situation you must make sure that body language and tone reflect the message you want to convey. If the tone or the body language is incongruent with the words, then the message seems inconsistent. You must be able to listen, be comfortable with silences, be patient, be understanding, but you must remain on message and be assertive. Do not become apologetic as this dilutes the message. Phrases like, 'I wish I didn't have to speak to you about this but...' will diminish your assertiveness and purpose. Make sure your tone of voice signals discussion not inquisition, exploration not punishment.

6. Be consistent

Ensure that you are using a consistent approach. For example, if the person thinks you have one set of rules for this person and a different set for another, you'll be perceived as showing favoritism. Nothing erodes a relationship faster than perceived inequality. Employees have long-term memories of how you handled situations in the past. Aim for consistency in your leadership approach.

7. Choose the right place to have the conversation

Calling people into your office may not be the best strategy. Sitting in your own turf, behind your desk, shifts the balance of power too much on your side. Consider holding the meeting in a neutral place such as a meeting room where you can sit adjacent to each other without the desk as a barrier. Sitting side on or perpendicular can help as it means that direct eye contact is not always possible, and the employee may not feel as exposed and can look away without having to seemingly turn away from you.

8. Be upfront

Being upfront is the authentic and respectful approach. Start the conversation by stating why it is you need to talk to the person and clarify the issue. Be clear about what the conversation is intended to achieve. Begin the conversation with a strong statement, for example:

I have something I'd like to discuss with you that I think will help us work together more effectively. I'd like to talk about _____ with you, but first I'd like to get your point of view.
I'd like to talk about _____. I think we may have different ideas about how to _____.
I'd like to see if we might reach a better understanding about _____. I really want to hear your feelings about this and share my perspective as well.

At the end, summarize the agreements and thank them for being open to listening to you. Clarify any future actions to be undertaken.

9. Practice

Practice the conversation mentally. Try to put yourself in the shoes of the other person and how they will react to the conversation. Envisage various possibilities for how things might go during the discussion. Envisage yourself handling the different parts of the conversation and achieving the outcome you are hoping for. It can really help to practice in advance with a friend or colleague in advance.

10. Adopt a problem-solving approach

View the conversation as an opportunity to solve a problem or resolve a conflict. This is much easier if you can engage the person in the process by asking them:

- what they think the problem is
- if they have any ideas for solutions
- what they think the time frame/steps should be taken to implement the solution

If, however, the person is unable or unwilling to engage, then you need to continually reiterate the problem and keep giving examples to back up your concerns.

Professional Learning

Choose one of the following scenarios as the basis for professional reflection and discussion.

- Scenario 1: Sally Johnston**
- Scenario 2: David Anderson**
- Scenario 3: Emily Borthwick**
- Scenario 4: Karen Paterson**
- Scenario 5: James Brydon**
- Scenario 6: Adele and Mike Hart**

This activity is best undertaken with a partner or in a group of 3 or 4. One person adopts the role of the school leader, another the person who is the colleague, employee or parent taking part in the discussion. The other person observes the interaction and gives feedback.

Begin by planning for the meeting, taking account of the advice in this Guide, by asking the following questions:

- What is the exact nature of the problem or issue being described in the scenario?
- What is the desired outcome?
- How should the discussion begin?
- What might be the reaction of the person?
- What are the potential barriers to a successful outcome?
- How should the conversation finish?

Then role play the conversation between the school leader and the other person described in the scenario.

Afterwards, review the conversation and assess how successful it was in resolving the situation. Identify what went well, and what didn't. Agree how aspects of the conversation might have been handled differently or more effectively.

Scenario 1: Sally Johnston

You are Headteacher of a school where a member of your staff, Sally Johnston, was unsuccessful in a recent interview for the post of Depute Head. You appointed an external candidate to the post.

Sally is 45 years old and has worked at Duncastle for 18 years, the last 8 of which have been in a promoted post. When the previous DHT was absent through illness, Sally took on the acting Depute Head role and performed capably during her 5 months in post.

Sally is known for her hard work and dedication to the school. She is popular with most staff and parents and strong in areas of curriculum development and learning and teaching. She is regarded by some staff as being a manager who does not consult colleagues about key decisions and school developments. You have spoken to her about this in the past.

Most staff expected Sally to be appointed to the post permanently and there was surprise when an external candidate was successful. When you called her to say that she had been unsuccessful, Sally was devastated. You told her that you would meet with her to discuss her job interview and her career.

To make things more difficult, you have enjoyed a good relationship with Sally over the years. She is loyal and professional, and you have a high regard for her professional skills and competence.

There were 3 reasons that she was unsuccessful.

1 The Depute Head's post in the school has responsibility for Pupil Support – ie, overseeing pastoral support, personal & social development and additional support needs. These are not areas where Sally is strong, and her limited experience led her to make some poor judgements and decisions during her spell as Acting DHT. By contrast, the external candidate was able to evidence significant strengths and experience in this area of the school's work.

2 Sally's interview performance was unexpectedly weak in places. She appeared nervous throughout and some of her answers were poorly developed. One particular answer on the subject of promoting pupil voice was a low level and descriptive. She didn't convince the interview panel that she possessed the requisite leadership skills for the post, despite her 5 months acting experience.

3 Although you could not fault Sally for commitment and effort, you have some reservations about her leadership skills. During her tenure as Acting DHT, she sometimes made decisions without consulting others, resulting in confusion and frustration amongst staff involved. Her communication skills, both verbally and in writing, were suspect at times and brought criticism from parents and staff at the school. Sometimes, under pressure, Sally became emotional and angry with staff, although she always apologised afterwards.

The conversation: You are going to meet with Sally to discuss the reasons for her not being appointed to the permanent DHT post.

Scenario 2: David Anderson

Yesterday there was an incident at your school which resulted in a pupil being excluded. Ryan Anderson - the pupil in question - became involved in an altercation with another pupil (Steven Davidson) during morning break. This resulted in Ryan attacking Steven physically, punching him several times on his face and kicking his body when on the ground.

The attack was witnessed by a learning assistant and two other pupils, although nobody observed the start of the argument between the boys. You took statements from all three witnesses which provided clear evidence that Ryan assaulted Steven.

You instructed one of your staff to take Steven to hospital, since you suspected that his nose may be broken. You phoned Steven's parents to explain what had happened and the action you had taken. You then called Ryan's mother and asked her to collect him from school, informing her that you had decided to exclude Ryan for one week. This exclusion was longer than normal, due to the severity of the attack and also because it was Ryan's second exclusion of the session. The previous exclusion was for fighting and aggressive behaviour. You explained to Ryan's mother that you intended to convene a multi-agency meeting with colleagues to discuss the conditions for Ryan's return to school and to establish what support that would be required.

Yesterday afternoon you received a call from Ryan's father (David Anderson) who was furious about his son's exclusion. He insisted that Ryan had been severely provoked by Steven, claiming that Steven had kicked Ryan twice, and it was this provocation that led to Ryan's retaliation.

Mr Anderson claimed that several other pupils witnessed Steven kicking Ryan, and he demanded to know why you excluded Ryan and not Steven. You explained that you had investigated the matter and there were no other pupils or staff who had witnessed Steven attacking Ryan.

Mr Anderson became enraged at what he believed was the failure of the school to protect his son and at the unjust decision to exclude Ryan. He refused to accept that Ryan has any behavioural issues and told you that he did not want any multi-agency involvement since, this would 'tarnish' Ryan's school record.

By the end of the phone call, he was shouting angrily and demanding a meeting to overturn the exclusion. He stated that he would be turning up to school with Ryan as usual the following day. You told Mr Anderson that you were willing to discuss Ryan's exclusion, but that you had no intention of altering your decision, given the evidence of Ryan's assault.

This morning you learned that Steven's parents had contacted the police and wished to bring an assault charge against Ryan. They are also angry that the school failed in its duty of care to protect their son and they are lodging a formal complaint with the education authority to demand that Ryan Anderson does not return to the school.

You have also learned that David Anderson has a history of domestic violence and is known within the community as someone with anger management issues.

The conversation: You are going to meet with David Anderson to discuss the reasons for Ryan's exclusion and the conditions of his son's return.

Scenario 3: Emily Borthwick

Emily Borthwick, a teacher in your school, is going through a divorce. Married for 10 years, Emily's relationship with her husband (Craig) appears to have broken down irretrievably.

Emily is a skilled and experienced teacher, popular with other colleagues and pupils. She has worked at Duncastle School for 8 years and everyone regards her as hardworking and professional. She runs several extra-curricular clubs within the school and has given a lot of her own time to developing dance and drama activities.

Emily's marital problems appear, however, to be impacting on her work and other staff have expressed concern. One colleague told you that the standard of behaviour in Emily's class has declined and that Emily has been heard shouting at pupils. There have been several recent altercations with pupils resulting in referrals to senior management.

You have spoken informally to Emily about this and let her know that you are sympathetic to her situation. You have suggested that she consider taking time off work, or make an appointment to see her doctor, since you believe that she may be suffering from stress and anxiety.

Emily refuses to take time off work. She has told you that her job is the only thing that is keeping her sane. She resents the idea that she is perceived by colleagues as not coping. She acknowledges that she is tired and sometimes distracted by her marital problems, but she refutes that it is affecting her performance as a teacher. She attributes the disruption in her class to the unruly behaviour of a challenging group of girls.

Recently you have learned that Emily is spending time talking on her mobile phone during classes.

You have raised this matter with her. She says she was providing urgent information to her solicitor. One of Emily's pupils has complained that she had been speaking on her mobile for almost the whole lesson and that the class had been given little or no work to do.

Yesterday, another parent contacted you complaining that the Emily appeared to be spending a lot of time on the internet, when she should be teaching her class. The parent suspects that Emily is using the web for 'personal' and not professional reasons.

At the start of this week Emily did not turn up to take the after school dance club which she runs. Pupils, preparing for a dance competition, waited for more than 30 minutes in the gym hall and parents were also inconvenienced. Emily explained to you that she had personal matters to attend to and thought she had informed the school office that the class was cancelled.

This afternoon you passed Emily's classroom and noticed that she was not present. On Emily's return, you asked her about her absence from the classroom and she explained that she had been searching for a data projector. You subsequently learned from another colleague that, during her absence from class, Emily had been making a call on her mobile in the staff room.

Whilst sympathetic to Emily's predicament, you are now concerned about Emily's performance as a teacher and about an apparent lack of professionalism in her work.

The conversation: You are going to meet with Emily to discuss the difficulties she is experiencing and how this is impacting on her day-to-day work.

Scenario 4: Karen Paterson

Karen Paterson is an experienced teacher who has taught at your school for over 20 years. She is a competent professional but has tended to respond negatively to changes taking place in education. She tends to stick with tried and tested approaches to teaching and she is resistant to change. She avoids using the new technologies that are proving popular with other colleagues and learners in the school. Karen accepts that she is slow to embrace new teaching approaches but claims that traditional methods are no less effective in meeting the needs of learners.

Georgia Wilson is a recently appointed Principal Teacher. She is relatively young, having been teaching only 5 years, but she has excellent skills and knowledge in learning and teaching. You appointed Georgia two months ago, recognising that she would bring new approaches and ideas to the school. She has particular skills in using new digital media and learning technologies, and she has also carried out extensive CPD across the local authority in Thinking Skills.

Two weeks ago Georgia, in her role as Principal Teacher, observed Karen teaching a lesson. At the end of the lesson Georgia gave feedback informally to Karen. She observed that whilst Karen's management of the class was effective, the planning of the lesson could be improved in order to provide better differentiation and wider opportunities for assessment.

Karen responded very negatively to Georgia's feedback and suggestions for improvement. She confided privately to other colleagues that she found it humiliating to be 'lectured by someone just out of teacher training college'. She described Georgia as 'a young person in a hurry to get promoted,' and resented the criticism that her planning failed to meet the needs of her pupils.

Georgia learned of Karen's negative response to the observation and decided to speak with her at lunchtime. She apologised if her well-meaning comments had caused offence. Georgia also pointed out that she had a responsibility to promote learning and teaching across the school and to share some of the skills and knowledge she had developed on her recent Masters course.

Karen responded even more negatively to this conversation, again confiding in colleagues that she found Georgia to be patronising, overbearing and filled with her own self-importance. Georgia, on the other hand, spoke to her friends on the staff about how she found Karen to be 'in the Dark Ages' and 'a bit of a dinosaur' when it came to learning and teaching.

Georgia's comments got back to Karen, who responded angrily by confronting Georgia outside the staffroom at morning interval. The heated exchange was witnessed by other staff and some pupils. Karen told Georgia that she wasn't about to take instruction from someone who had only just arrived at the school, and that when she wanted advice she would ask for it. Georgia refused to back down, describing Karen's approaches to learning and teaching as being 'out of the Ark.'

The poor relationship between the two teachers has created division amongst the staff. Several teachers share Karen's resentment of Georgia's growing influence in areas such as planning and pedagogy. The younger members of staff, by contrast, see Georgia as a champion of new and exciting approaches to learning and teaching, and they are pleased to see her take on the 'old guard'. There is a frosty atmosphere in the staffroom and staff morale is low.

The conversation: You have decided to meet with Karen to discuss the issue that has arisen between her and Georgia and how it is affecting work of the school.

Scenario 5: James Brydon

James is 42 years old and a late entrant to the teaching profession, having spent the early part of his career working in the hospitality industry. He is an amiable person, supportive of colleagues and usually the first person to volunteer for working parties and extra-curricular activities. He is also someone whom you like personally and engage with socially from time to time.

As a classroom teacher, however, James is failing. Despite the support that you and other senior managers have given to him, the standard of teaching and learning in James's class is unacceptable. His pupils are the lowest attaining in the school and this has resulted in numerous complaints from parents.

James finds behaviour management particularly challenging and he is perceived by pupils and colleagues as being too soft. James's classroom is always very noisy, and he talks loudly above the general chat of pupils. He seems unable to maintain discipline and there are regular calls for senior management to go to his classroom to provide support in managing incidents.

James's problems, however, are not only related to behaviour management. You are aware that his planning is poor and at times non-existent. Pupil work is rarely marked, and learners receive little feedback from James about their progress. James tends to deliver lessons through teacher-centred approaches, and there are limited opportunities for group work or active learning.

During the past 2 weeks you have carried out several observations of James's teaching. As Headteacher, your presence in the class moderated any behavioural issues, but it is clear to you that James is failing to meet the standards required of a competent teacher. His classroom organisation is poor, learners are clearly not stimulated by James's teaching and there is little evidence of assessment being carried out or tracking of pupil progress.

In recent months you have had several discussions with James about his performance as a teacher, and you have given him advice about how he might improve. James recognises that he is experiencing difficulties but believes that the root of this is declining standards of discipline throughout the school.

Recently, James has been absent from school, particularly on Mondays and Fridays, with an assortment of ailments, including migraine headaches, colds and upset stomach.

You are now in a position where you are questioning James's competence as a teacher and you have taken the decision to embark on performance management. This means that you will be formally addressing the concerns about his teaching and setting targets for improvement, as well as identifying what support may be required. You also need to alert him to the possibility that should he fail to make the required improvements to his performance, he may not be able to continue his career in the teaching profession.

The conversation: You are going to meet with James to inform him that you have decided to enter into performance management and to agree short-term targets for improvement. You will be required to explain to him why you have made this decision, and alert him to the possible consequences of his failure to meet these targets.

Scenario 6: Adele and Mike Hart

Ruby Hart is a pupil at your school. During the past 2 years you have had several meetings with Ruby's parents - Adele and Mike Hart - to discuss lack of progress in aspects of her learning.

Ruby's parents have become critical of the school and, in particular, Ruby's teacher Jayne Kennedy. They blame poor teaching for Ruby's lack of progress and believe that Ruby is not sufficiently challenged or stimulated. Adele and Mike cannot understand why Ruby, who is a bright and motivated child, has fallen behind her peers in key areas of her learning including reading and writing.

Ruby's parents will not countenance the view that Ruby may need additional support with her learning. When you have raised this with them in the past, Adele and Mike become angry and emotional, asserting their view that that Ruby is an able child who is suffering from having an incompetent teacher. They argue that the pace of learning for Ruby is too slow and that the teaching of literacy is of such a poor standard that it is damaging her progress.

You have spoken with Jayne Kennedy and determined that Ruby is an able child, but that she struggles with aspects of literacy – particularly spelling and reading – despite having a good vocabulary and being an articulate speaker.

In recent weeks you have involved the school's support for learning teacher in carrying out a series of assessments of Ruby. This has identified a number of issues including poor phonological awareness and auditory discrimination, difficulties with spelling, as well as blending and breaking down words. The support for learning teacher has also identified a problem with Ruby's fine motor skills that affects her hand writing.

Following discussion with Ruby's teacher and the support for learning teacher, you are now of the view that Ruby is dyslexic. This presents you with two problems. Firstly, you believe that Adele and Mike Hart will respond negatively to this news and are likely to refute your assessment of dyslexia. You suspect that they will regard your assessment as an excuse for protecting an incompetent teacher and evidence of a further failure of the school to address their concerns.

You are also concerned that it has taken a long time to identify Ruby as being dyslexic. She has attended Duncastle School for a number of years and you believe that these tests and screening assessments should have been done much earlier, given the problems Ruby was presenting in her learning. Jayne Kennedy is an experienced teacher who, in your view, should have highlighted these difficulties earlier and involved the support for learning teacher in assessing Ruby. If Adele and Mike Hart accept that Ruby is dyslexic, they are likely to be very critical of the school's failure to identify her problems at an earlier stage of her education.

You have a learning plan devised for Ruby, which includes activities to support auditory work and phonological awareness, as well as exercises to improve her fine motor skills. You plan to involve learning assistants and the school's support for learning teacher and also to acquire new resources for the school to support children with dyslexia. You are however worried about how Adele and Mike Hart will respond.

The conversation: You are going to meet with Adele and Mike Hart to inform them that you believe Ruby is dyslexic and to discuss how the school plans to support her.