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CHALLENGING HR CONVERSATIONS

- practical phrases you can use immediately

Conducting difficult conversations in English has become part of everyday work for HR professionals — whether it's handling disciplinary meetings, delivering difficult feedback, communicating organizational changes, resolving conflicts, or managing conversations about ending employment.

At the same time, many professionals have a good command of English, yet in these situations they often:

- struggle to find the right words when the conversation becomes challenging
- are unsure how to communicate difficult messages in a professional and empathetic way
- wonder which expressions to use to strike the right balance between firmness and respect
- worry about sounding either too direct or, conversely, too vague
- feel stressed because every word they choose can influence the other person's emotions

This resource was created to provide you with practical, ready-to-use phrases that you can confidently use during important HR conversations.



What will you find here?

The material is divided into six key areas of business meetings:

Preparing for a Difficult Conversation..... 4

How to prepare for a difficult conversation by defining its objective, organizing your key points, and opening the meeting in a professional way. You'll learn phrases that help create a calm atmosphere and set the right tone from the very beginning.

Giving Difficult Messages & Addressing Concerns 6

How to deliver difficult messages and address concerns, conflicts, and policy violations in a calm, professional, and non-judgmental manner. You'll learn phrases that help you remain neutral, present facts clearly, and keep the conversation respectful and constructive.

Managing Employee Reactions & Difficult Emotions..... 8

How to respond to employees' emotions, handle objections, and navigate conversations when anger, frustration, or disagreement arises. You'll discover phrases that help you stay in control of the conversation while creating a sense of psychological safety.

Discussing Performance, Expectations & solutions 10

How to discuss performance issues. Learn how to work collaboratively on solutions, set clear expectations, and agree on next steps after a difficult conversation. You'll find practical phrases that support constructive dialogue and encourage accountability on both sides.

Ending a Difficult Conversation Professionally 12

How to close a difficult conversation in a calm and constructive way. You'll learn how to summarize key agreements, confirm follow-up actions, and end the meeting while maintaining professionalism and a positive working relationship.

Want to handle difficult HR conversations in English with greater confidence?..14

A concise, practical course for HR Business Partners, HR professionals, and managers who want to conduct difficult conversations with employees and managers confidently in English— from delivering feedback and holding corrective conversations to communicating organizational changes and other difficult decisions.



How to use this material?

The best effect will be achieved if:

- you will choose few phrases from each section
- you will practice them out loud
- you will apply those phrases during one of your business meetings

You do not need to know everything — few, well-known structures are enough.

Let's start 😊😊

Preparing for a Difficult Conversation

The first few minutes of a conversation can have a significant impact on how it unfolds. This is when you establish psychological safety, set the purpose of the meeting, and demonstrate that the discussion will be conducted professionally and with respect. Clearly explaining why the meeting is taking place and what it will cover helps reduce unnecessary stress and encourages the other person to engage openly in the conversation.

To communicate the purpose and structure of the meeting clearly and confidently, it's important to prepare in advance. Good preparation helps ensure that the initial stress or emotions—whether experienced by the employee or by you—do not undermine the professionalism of the conversation.

Opening the conversation

- Thank you for meeting with me today.
- I appreciate you taking the time to talk.
- Thank you for joining me. I wanted us to have some time to discuss an important matter.
- I invited you today to have some space for a conversation.



Explaining the purpose

- The purpose of today's conversation is to discuss... some concerns regarding your recent performance.
- I'd like to talk about... a situation that has recently come to our attention.
- I'd like us to discuss... the feedback we've received. What is significant is to hear your perspective as well.
- The reason for this meeting is to review... what has happened and discuss the following steps.
- I wanted to meet today to discuss... some concerns that have been raised regarding communication within the team.

Setting the tone

- This conversation is intended to be supportive and constructive.
- I need to be sure you feel comfy so if there is anything you need, just let me know.
- My goal is to understand your perspective as well as share ours.
- I'd like us to have an open and respectful discussion.
- I hope we can have an honest conversation and agree on the best way forward.
- This is an opportunity for us to discuss the situation and identify possible solutions together

Explaining the structure

- First, I'll explain why I wanted to meet, then I'd like to hear your perspective.
- I'll briefly describe the situation, and then we'll discuss possible action steps.
- I'd like to start by sharing my observations before hearing your thoughts.



- After we've discussed the situation, we'll agree on any actions that may be needed.
- At the end of our conversation, we'll summarise what we've agreed. Let's form this meeting in that way that I will listen to your point of view and then recommend any possible solutions.

Inviting the employee to participate

- Before we begin, do you have any questions?
- Does that approach sound okay to you?
- Please feel free to share your perspective throughout the conversation.
- I'd like this to be a two-way discussion.
- If anything is unclear, please let me know at any point.

Giving Difficult Messages & Addressing Concerns

HR conversations often involve sensitive topics, such as employee concerns, workplace conflicts, policy violations, employee complaints, or difficult organizational updates. In these situations, it is essential to communicate in a calm, objective, and non-judgmental manner. Carefully chosen language helps you remain neutral, build trust, and create an environment where open and honest dialogue can take place. When delivering difficult news, thorough preparation is essential. While you cannot control how the other person will react, you can ensure that your own communication remains clear, professional, and consistent throughout the conversation.

Introducing the issue

- I'd like to discuss a concern that has been brought to our attention.
- I'd like to talk about a situation that requires clarification.
- We've received some information that we'd like to discuss with you.



- I'd like to go through a situation that has recently been reported.
- There are a few matters I'd like us to address today.

Presenting facts

- Based on the information we have, several employees reported that they felt excluded during team discussions.
- According to the information we've received, the agreed procedure was not followed on several occasions.
- From what we've gathered so far, there are different perspectives on what happened during the meeting.
- We've been made aware that there was a disagreement between you and another employee last Thursday.
- The information available to us suggests that there may have been a misunderstanding regarding the responsibilities assigned to your team.

Remaining neutral

- I'd like to focus on the facts rather than assumptions.
- At this stage, we're gathering information before drawing any conclusions.
- We're not making any assumptions about what happened.
- We'd like to understand the situation from all perspectives before deciding on the next steps.
- Our goal is to understand what happened and ensure that the situation is handled fairly.

Explaining why the conversation matters

- It's important that we address this matter promptly to prevent similar situations in the future.



- We take situations like this seriously because they can affect the work environment.
- We want to ensure that everyone involved is treated fairly throughout this process.
- Our responsibility is to understand the situation objectively before making any decisions.
- We appreciate your willingness to discuss this matter openly with us.

Inviting the employee to respond

- I'd like to hear your perspective on what happened.
- Can you tell me how you see the situation?
- Could you walk me through what happened from your point of view?
- Is there anything you'd like us to know before we continue?
- Is there any additional context that would help us better understand the situation?

Managing Employee Reactions & Difficult Emotions

Difficult conversations often trigger strong emotions, such as surprise, frustration, anger, or disappointment. The role of HR is not to judge an employee's emotions but to create a space for a calm and respectful discussion while keeping the conversation constructive. Using the right phrases helps you demonstrate empathy and respect, maintain professionalism, and guide the conversation back to the facts and possible solutions.



Acknowledging emotions

- I understand this may be difficult to hear.
- I can see that this situation is upsetting for you.
- I understand that you may have strong feelings about this.
- I appreciate that this conversation may not be easy.
- I can understand why you might feel frustrated.

Showing empathy while remaining neutral

- Thank you for sharing your perspective.
- I appreciate your honesty.
- I understand your point of view.
- Thank you for explaining how you see the situation.
- I appreciate you being open about your concerns.

Responding to objections

- I understand your concern. Let me explain why this issue has been raised.
- I hear what you're saying. I'd also like to explain how the situation has been perceived by others.
- That's helpful context. Let me clarify the information we have.
- I understand your perspective. At the same time, I'd like to focus on the facts we've gathered.
- Thank you for explaining your view. I'd like to discuss a few points in more detail.

Keeping the conversation on track

- Let's focus on the specific situation we're discussing today.
- I'd like us to stay focused on the facts.



- Let's take this one step at a time.
- I'd like to come back to the main issue for a moment.
- Let's make sure we fully understand this point before moving on.

De-escalating the conversation

- Let's take a moment to make sure we both understand each other.
- I want this conversation to remain respectful and constructive.
- We don't have to resolve everything immediately.
- Our goal today is to understand the situation and discuss the best way forward.
- Let's work together to find a constructive solution.

Discussing Performance, Expectations & solutions

Not every difficult HR conversation is about conflict or employee complaints. HR professionals often support managers in discussions about performance, expectations, and performance improvement plans. Clearly communicating expectations, discussing areas for development, and agreeing on next steps help ensure that the conversation remains professional, collaborative, and solution-focused.

Discussing performance

- I'd like to talk about your recent performance and some areas we've identified for improvement.
- We'd like to discuss the feedback we've received regarding your performance.



- There are a few aspects of your recent performance that we'd like to review together.
- We'd like to better understand some of the challenges you've been experiencing recently.
- Let's review your recent performance and discuss how we can support you moving forward.

Discussing expectations

- Going forward, we'd expect you to communicate any project delays to your manager as early as possible.
- We'd like to see more proactive communication with your team, especially when priorities change.
- It's important that you follow the agreed procedures and raise any concerns promptly.
- We'd expect you to demonstrate consistent collaboration with other team members, even in challenging situations.
- We'd like to agree on clear expectations moving forward so that we all have a shared understanding of what success looks like.

Discussing improvement

- Let's talk about what would help you improve in this area.
- What support do you think would help you meet these expectations?
- Let's identify a few practical steps you can focus on.
- We'd like to work with you on an improvement plan.
- Our goal is to help you succeed in your role.

Agreeing on next steps

- Let's agree on the next steps.



- I'd like us to agree on a clear action plan.
- We'll schedule a follow-up meeting to review your progress.
- We'll document today's discussion and the agreed actions.
- We'll review the progress together in the coming weeks.

Checking understanding and commitment

- Does that sound reasonable to you?
- Do you have any questions about what we've discussed?
- Is everything we've agreed clear?
- Are you comfortable with the next steps we've outlined?
- Is there anything you'd like to clarify before we finish?

Ending a Difficult Conversation Professionally

The way a difficult conversation ends is just as important as how it begins. A clear summary ensures that both parties have a shared understanding of what has been agreed, what the next steps are, and what they can expect moving forward. Ending the conversation professionally helps foster a sense of fairness, strengthens trust in the HR process, and leaves the door open for continued collaboration.

Summarising the discussion

- To summarise today's conversation, we've discussed the concerns regarding communication within the team and agreed on the next steps.
- Let me briefly debrief what we've agreed today.
- Just to make sure we're on the same page, here's a summary of today's discussion.



- Before we finish, I'd like to recap the key points we've covered.
- We've discussed the situation, your perspective, and the actions we'll be taking moving forward.

Confirming next steps

- The next step will be for HR to review all the information before making any decisions.
- We'll follow up with you by the end of next week.
- We'll schedule a follow-up meeting to review the progress we've discussed.
- We'll keep you informed throughout the process.
- If any additional information becomes available, we'll let you know.

Offering support

- If you have any questions after today's conversation, please don't hesitate to contact me.
- If there's anything you need clarification on, I'm happy to help.
- Please let us know if there's any support you may need moving forward.
- If anything changes, feel free to reach out at any time.
- We're here to support you throughout this process.

Ending the conversation

- Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.
- I appreciate your openness during this conversation.
- Thank you for sharing your perspective.
- I appreciate your cooperation today.
- Thank you for your time. We'll be in touch regarding the next steps.



Want to handle difficult HR conversations in English with greater confidence?

We invite you to join our mini course: **Difficult HR Conversations in English** **Online | Real-Life Conversation Simulations | Small Groups**

A concise, practical course for HR Business Partners, HR professionals, and managers who want to confidently handle difficult conversations with employees and managers in English.

The course focuses on real-life HR scenarios, practical ready-to-use phrases, and intensive conversation practice—without the traditional classroom approach to language learning.

What you'll learn

- ✓ Conduct difficult conversations with employees in English
- ✓ Deliver difficult messages and discuss sensitive topics with confidence
- ✓ Lead conversations about performance, workplace conflicts, and employee complaints
- ✓ Respond professionally to employees' emotions and challenging questions
- ✓ Build confidence in handling difficult HR conversations in English

6 live online sessions (60 minutes each) | Small groups (up to 6 participants) | B1–B2 level



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Send us a message with the keyword **HR PRESENTATIONS** to receive the full course details.