

CONVERSATION STARTERS FOR MANAGERS FACING EMPLOYEES WITH CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

Situations like the threat of coronavirus and others, can at times challenge our expectations for safety and the future. Today's world and workplaces seem to be constantly changing and often no one is quite sure what will happen next in our society. For many of us, it makes us feel uncertain and this is fairly uncomfortable for most of us. As managers, we can feel a little uncertain, or out of our depth in this new territory as we try to help those under our care. When those around us finally pluck up the courage to speak, it is often with trepidation and can carry a lot of emotion.

As a rule of thumb, the employee's first concern is how will you react to their fears? Will you listen and respect their concerns, or will you disregard their emotions and criticise them? If you can realise this first point, it will help you navigate any kind of difficult conversation as people will see that:

- You care and are willing to listen
- You respect them, so they can trust you with their fears

Before you speak to someone it's important to check mood/time /place:

- Is this conversation in a confidential/private setting?
- If it's face-to-face, take them into a private room. When people express fears or emotions, they don't like to be exposed in front of others. Protecting their privacy says a lot to people, that they are safe. If they feel exposed, no amount of quality questions will open up a conversation.

Tips to help you navigate a conversation with a concerned employee

Privacy and respect

Gauge your surroundings.

Ask yourself: *"Where is the best place to have this discussion?"*

Ask your employee: *"Do you need a support person before you begin?"*

"Do you feel comfortable to have this discussion here? I want to ensure this is a comfortable and safe place for you."

Show you care – giving direction can come later

"People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care"

Theodore Roosevelt

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Show kindness and care. Don't brush off their anxiety or concerns as unimportant. Use a calm, quiet voice. Ask:

"How are you doing at the moment??"

"Are you okay? It sounds like you're really worried about..." e.g., children, safety, parents, infection control, job safety, etc

"Yes, I can see how that would worry you. Tell me more about that..."

Listen and try to understand from their viewpoint

- Keep quiet and allow them to talk – listen, listen, listen
- Don't interrupt
- Don't defend or justify; it will only create conflict
- Don't discard their opinions or fears as trivial
- Ask lots of clarifying questions if you're in doubt of the issue

"Help me understand your concerns. What are you most worried about and what do you need to know, to help you through this?"

"I understand your concern. What would you need to make you feel better about coming here each day to work?"

Affirm and Normalise

- People often fear that their concerns are unique and so something must be wrong with them.
- Discarding, minimising or laughing at their situation, will only make them retreat further and reinforce this fear. Try to avoid doing this.
- Ease their fears and worries by letting them know this is an expected and normal worry to have and you will work with them to find a solution.

"You know this is a common worry for a lot of people. We're all in this together, so let's see if myself, or someone else here can help find a solution."

Reflect back what you heard the employee say

- Learn to summarise and reflect back their concerns to ensure you've got it right.
- Keep asking and reflecting until the employee agrees.

"So am I right in hearing that" e.g., "You're frightened to come to work, because you have old parents at home and you're frightened there's not enough protection here? Have I got it right?"

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Discuss positive solution options (time to brainstorm together)

- Encourage the employee that you have their best concerns at heart and want to find a solution
- Don't presume you are the person for the task. Refer on if necessary.
- Negotiate when you can come back several options or with a definite answer.
- Avoid 'My way, or the Highway' statements. These people are feeling unsafe. They need your positive, solution finding support.

"OK, I see your dilemma and appreciate it's hard. Can I go away and look for some options for you? Can I come back to you with some options by the end of the day?"

"I'm not sure I'm the right person to answer this. Can I get ... to talk to you?"

Suggest support

- Try and be pre-prepared with support information, if you know someone is struggling. This will help you feel better equipped to handle certain aspects of distress.
- Have your onsite support numbers ready. Have EAPworks' information available digitally, or as a handout for the person to take home.
- If they are of the opposite sex, ask who they would trust to support them in your office.
- Have a sheet with Mental Health contact details, 1737 details, EAPworks and emergency numbers at hand to give out or utilise in the office.
- If they exhibit unusual distress, cease trying to work on the issue they came for. This person is now overwhelmed. Don't leave them alone. Don't dramatize it. Stay calm. Ask for support within the office while you negotiate with the person who best to contact, e.g., G.P, Psychologist, Counsellor, Mental health worker, Parent or support person.
- If the situation is extremely serious due to expressions of self-harm, or suicidal intention. Stay close by. Give support while you contact 111 and their G.P.

"I can see you're not coping well. I would like to get you help and support. While I do that, who would you like here to support you?" Secondly, 'Have you had this problem before? If so who would I contact, please?"

"I'm worried that you're not coping well at the moment. I would like to get you help and support. Can I call anyone who knows about this? Your G.P. perhaps.?"

"(Persons name), this is very serious. I need to get you support and help. I'm going to ask ... to stay with you while I contact someone who can come and keep you safe."

Remember EAPworks has a 'Manager Assist' programme to call anytime.

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