

Difficult Conversations

We have recently presented a sell out breakfast booster session in conjunction with Pro Manchester dealing with the vexed topic of “How to hold difficult conversations” with your team.

Are you responsible for managing a team? Are you facing a conversation that you are not looking forward to? This could be anything from delivering bad news about a promotion bid, breaking news about redundancies, giving awkward feedback, holding a performance review or dealing with a disciplinary matter. What makes them so difficult? A number of factors help to explain this:

- The “cringe factor” – It is going to “sound awful” and therefore will make me feel awful
- I might say the wrong thing and get myself into hot water
- They might get emotional and I can’t handle that
- I am not used to doing this sort of thing
- I am usually “on their side” so this feels strange

Working with clients in this area over a long period of time, I have developed a “5 step plan” that sets out a practical way of approaching these conversations which helps you avoid the pitfalls and leads to better results. In our “Breakfast booster” session we explored these in more detail but in summary, the 5 steps are:

1 - Preparation – The step which pays the most dividends for time spent. You can’t have these conversations successfully on an “impromptu” basis. Research the facts – what has led to the need for the discussion? Where does it fit into our HR procedures? Am I the right person to be holding this discussion? What facts do I want to present and what are the expected responses? Venue – not the local coffee shop or a meeting room with see through walls!

2 - Opening – Avoid the vague small talk misguidedly designed to put them at ease. Instead, thank them for coming and outline what you are here to discuss. Tell them that they will have a full chance to respond and that once you have both had your say you will agree an outcome or tell them what will happen next.

3 - Evidence – If this is performance improvement or a disciplinary matter – take a considered view of the main areas to present. Not too many as the impact will be less. Outline the issue and give them an example of evidence in support. Avoid vague statements like “the general consensus is...” or “the feedback I have received is...” which cannot be supported by facts. This is also the stage where you let them have their say. And you need to actively listen to the response. However resist the temptation to then merely repeat your position. By appropriate words and body language you can convey the message that you have taken on board the comments they have made and that what they have said will be taken into account.

4 – Impact - Tell them what the impact of their lack of performance or misconduct has been. People respond better if they understand the impact. For example, as a result of your lateness five times this month we have not met our target with the client.

5 – Outcome – You may have followed all of the above to the letter – but the benefit it is mostly lost unless there is a definite outcome and this is confirmed in writing, usually by email. The tone and content of the outcome will be dictated by whether the process was formal (for example a disciplinary procedure or an appraisal meeting) or informal. However in all cases, spell out what actions have been discussed and agreed, what the timescales are and what will happen if the actions/targets are not met.

If you would like a complimentary copy of my presentation please give me a call on 0161 618 1032 or send me an email lee.jefcott@blueskylaw.co.uk