



How to:

**Handle Difficult
Conversations in the
Workplace**



Introduction

This short guide offers advice on how to approach some of the more common difficult conversations that you may find yourself needing to have in the workplace.

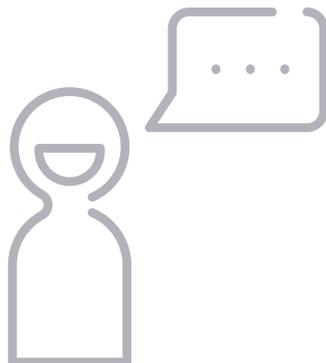
Confronting issues or asking sensitive or difficult questions is daunting but there are guidelines to show how such a conversation can be an opportunity to be heard.

It's about **turning a negative into a positive**. Don't go in ready to argue with a manager or colleague – go in prepared to discuss an issue and raise a concern, not a complaint, and know when to show understanding and when to hold your ground.

Remember, it's not always "what you say" but "how you say it" that is important.

There are two obvious ways to communicate an issue:

Spoken



Written



The Conversation

How do I raise a concern about a colleague at work?

This guide offers you advice about the two main areas where conflict can arise: Criticism of a colleague's work or; something more personal, such as their attitude towards you or others.

What are our first thoughts?

Have I spoken to that person about what is bothering me?

Should I speak to my manager or HR first?

Can I evidence my concern?

What will the reaction be?

How will it effect the atmosphere in the work-place or in the team?

How am I going to be perceived in all this?

A useful exercise would be to arrange the above in order of importance which most likely would give us all a very different list but let's concentrate on the last question.

How am I going to be perceived in all this?

The value of the spoken word is that it has a human face.

It shows confidence and a level of understanding and willingness to resolve an issue without going down a more official route, such as a company's grievance procedure. In many ways, the spoken word offers an opportunity to present something as being more of a concern than a complaint and, whenever possible, this is how you should deliver it.

Emails can suffer from a lack of tone and can be too statement-like and accusatory whereas the spoken word has your voice as its filter; your tone; your body language and; your facial expression.

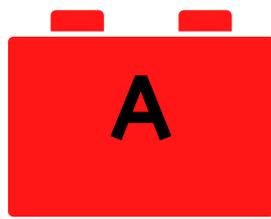
Don't underplay the importance of what is bothering you but stick to the facts and avoid any desire to over-elaborate.

Here's an example

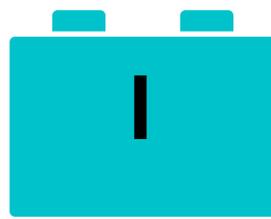
A colleague is constantly looking at their mobile phone when they should be working. It's something you've noticed before. It's a busy day today and you need to complete a piece of work and every time you look up there's Peter, looking at his mobile. You don't feel comfortable confronting Peter so decide to speak to your line manager.



Use the following approach as the building blocks for how you are going to inform your line manager:



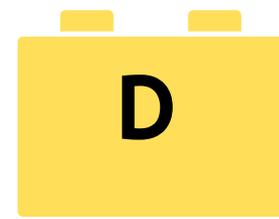
Apologise



Identify



Reason



De-personalise

Consider that your line manager's reaction will be relative to your approach so you need to be conscious whether you're making a neutral or negative assumption.

Your choice of words will determine which you are being and this will affect the conclusion.

Now look at the two scenarios below:

Neutral assumption (De-personalised)

"(A) I know this may sound trivial but...
(I) Peter is constantly looking at his phone... (R) and we're all so busy at the moment"

Negative assumption (Personalised)

"(A) 'I'm sorry to bring this up but... (I) Peter has had his big nose in his mobile for the last 2 hours... (R) while the rest of us are working like idiots to get the report out on time... It's really annoying me to be honest"

The neutral assumption shows a good attitude and is more aligned with a team dynamic whereas the negative assumption displays a more personal and aggressive attitude, it will not reflect well on you and is not so easy to defend.

Now consider these two responses from your line manager:

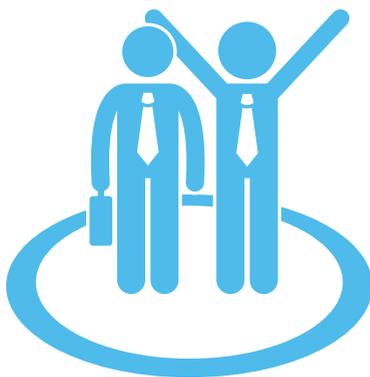
"Thanks for letting me know,
I'll have a quiet word with
Peter"

or

"Peter's mother is seriously ill and his
sister is with her in the UK. He's told
me about it but asked to keep it
personal. His sister is messaging him
with updates"

A simple "Oh gosh, I didn't know. I hope she will be okay" would then complete the professional, considerate and neutral approach.

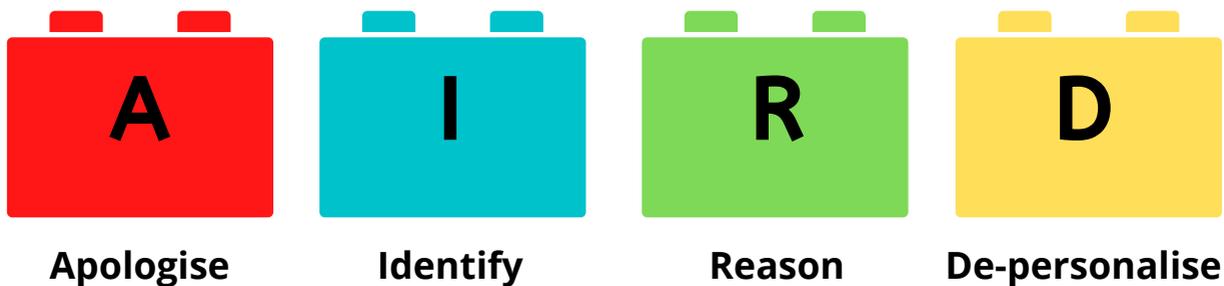
Making the same reply would not have the same emotional depth if you had started the conversation with a negative assumption.



You're looking to achieve the best outcome so, adopting a neutral approach will most likely elicit a positive conclusion no matter what that response is.

Lets summarise the 'spoken word' approach.

Even though you are reporting a negative, see it as an opportunity to project yourself in a positive light. You're a team player and if someone is not helping that team achieve its goal, it's perfectly fine to mention it. If you decide to speak to Peter yourself the model above still applies.



"Hey Pete, (A) sorry to bring this up mate but (I) you're on your mobile a lot (R). Is everything all right?"

Neutral assumption = positive conclusions.

"Yeah, it's my mum she's not very well" **or**

"Just checking the footy from last night"

If it's the latter then hopefully Peter will take notice which is great, as no further action needs to be taken. But, if he continues then adopt the same stance and speak to your line manager:

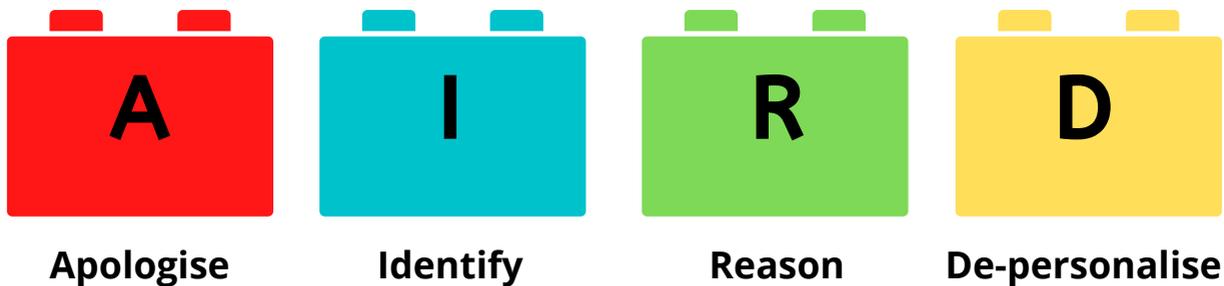
Mention that you have spoken to Peter about it but maybe it needs to come from someone with more authority. Ask your manager to be discreet about how he has found out so as to protect the working relationship you have with Peter.

The Email

How do I raise a concern about a colleague at work?

An email can still be an effective method to communicate an issue to a manager. For those with ASD, an email may be your preferred option as your body language and tone may not help you to be as expressive.

The model is still the same...



The email approach will mean one thing is certain - there will be a record of the concern. You will have a copy in your sent items and your manager or colleague will have a copy in their inbox.

It's never easy to discuss a colleague 'behind their back' even if the reason for doing so is sound. A well worded and balanced email can serve the same purpose as a verbal disclosure.



Lets look at some examples

Hi Julie,

(A) I'm really sorry to have to email this to you but (I) I've just got to tell you about the really inappropriate chat I'm hearing in the staff canteen. I don't want to mention any names as it might be just innocent fun, but (R) it's upsetting and offensive and to be honest it isn't even that funny. The longer I just sit there and say nothing the worse I feel for not doing anything. It's like I'm agreeing with it but I don't. I really dislike it.

If you could maybe say something at the next staff meeting or ask HR to send an 'all-staff' email that would be great and should hopefully stop it.

Kind regards
Chris



The tone of the email is fair, professional and depersonalised but most of all it has a 'conversational' feel to it rather than a strict or dictatorial edge. Avoid 'telling' your manager what to do as it may not be received well.

Let's look at the same message but with the De-personalised element of the A.I.R model being ignored.

Hi Julie

I'm really sorry to have to email this to you but I feel that I need to bring to your attention that both Gary and Steven have been spouting inappropriate rubbish in the staff canteen and no one is really laughing.

I can't imagine what those two are like when they've had a beer or two. I don't like it and unless something is done about it I'm going to have to take the law into my own hands.

I don't like how it's making me feel and me sitting there, saying nothing, is making me really angry and I want something done about it.

Kind regards
Chris

In this example, Chris has been too personal and negative in his views and in doing so, he has not represented himself well. His reasoning is still sound and his views honourable but his aggressive tone and language is as much of a concern as the issue he has reported.

This is an extreme example but even removing the threat to 'take the law into my own hands' doesn't alter the overall effect. If Chris had wanted to promote himself and his team ideals to a line manager then it is fair to say he has missed his opportunity.

It's not all about using pretty language either. You don't have to be a genius at English or be able to use elegant sentences to stick within the guidelines of the A.I.R.

Summing Up

There is no perfect fix that can be effortlessly applied to any and all workplace scenarios. If there was, then someone would have thought of it by now.

What is absolutely certain is that there is a wrong way to go about having a difficult conversation and the greatest difficulty with any method is 'personalisation' as this will almost certainly devalue your position. Avoiding it at all costs is key to maintaining that neutral position and achieving that positive conclusion.

Key points to consider

- Having a difficult conversation is an opportunity to show yourself in a positive light, whatever the issue.
- Promote yourself as a team player who is considerate and understanding.
- Avoid personal sentiment or aggressive language and tone.
- Avoid accusation or naming and shaming unless you have to.
- Apologise, Identify and Reason your written or verbal statement.



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