

Walking on Eggshells, how to handle a sensitive issue

Most of us are careful about how we tackle sensitive issues with colleagues and family members. Each involves special considerations in how to go about raising a subject you have been avoiding.

At work, managers are often uncertain about tackling staff on issues that may be judged 'sensitive'. When not handled with clarity and confidence, discussions that centre on performance, attendance or timekeeping, or more intimate matters like behaviour or even personal hygiene can create unnecessary tensions with the result that things can get worse, not better.

I have added some pointers below to help managers who need to tackle delicate matters in a productive, fair and balanced way, to be sure of getting the results they need. Striking the right note of respectful concern for the employee, personally and professionally, while addressing the job performance or other issues directly can be challenging.

Remember that sincerity goes a long way, so the staff member should understand that you are genuinely concerned and why. If you are uncomfortable about raising the subject you need to discuss, tell them. After all, any sensitive person would be cautious, and it is OK to explain that without making a big deal of it. For example "I been wanting to talk to you but was not sure how to approach it" is a sincere expression of concern for the other person and it shows your human side (which sometimes disappears when a manager is nervous).

At home it is a different matter. We may be afraid of their reaction, hurting their feelings, appearing disloyal, or all of these. Also, many domestic issues rumble on for years, and bringing it up again can ferment disaster. So a different kind of caution is needed. On the plus side, the advantage of tackling a sensitive issue at home is that we can approach the conversation over time, and we don't have to appear as decisive as a manager would. We can also offer a different kind of personal support at home (though beware of interfering or 'supervising').

Again, sincerity and intention are everything, so you'll need to make sure first that the other person can really hear what you are going to say. You must also be clear about your own intentions. A moan is still a moan even when it is dressed up as concern. If you are not sincere the other person's radar will

pick up your underlying intent, especially if this is not the first time the matter has been raised.

Here are some pointers on how to discuss sensitive issues with a colleague or family member:

At work

Understand what you want to achieve

Usually this means a change in the other person's behaviour in some way. Is this a reasonable expectation? How would you feel if someone approached you to discuss the same topic?

Know your goal

Having a goal will help to keep you focused, and to avoid being side-tracked by diversionary questions or comments. What outcome do you want? How will you know the conversation has been a productive one?

Arrange a meeting

Do this face to face if possible or on the phone if not. Avoid email. Tell them it is important, but do not mention what it is about except in general terms ("A work matter", or "Something that is important to us both", for example). Avoid delay between making the appointment and holding it. If it is important it is important enough to act quickly.

Time and place

Make sure you won't be interrupted and that there are no distractions; you must give the other person your full attention. Ensure you have enough time to build a little rapport and set the tone of the meeting before launching straight into the subject.

The message

Tell them what it is to want to say clearly and without preamble. Avoid hedging, or using jargon. Explain clearly what it is you want to say.

Listen and observe

Ask them what they think about what you have said. Listen carefully to their response. Pay attention to non-verbal language as well. They may be upset or

disgruntled. That is OK; above all avoid entering into a debate about their reaction. Let them have their feelings, respond to their needs.

Be aware that if you have dropped a bombshell of some sort they'll need time to take it in, so be patient and offer time if they need it.

Summarise

Conclude by thanking them and affirming, sincerely, your continued support. Depending on the content, consider scheduling a quick discussion soon to check if they have any further questions or comments. Agree with them what happens next, and any resources or support you intend to provide or that are otherwise available to them.

Know when to end

Close the conversation politely. Clearly signalling that it is at an end will avoid getting drawn into unproductive analysis, justifications or argument. Knowing when to end is almost as important as knowing how to start, if your conversation is hijacked by the other person it can undo all your good work.

Know the outcome you want, set goals for their conversations and respectfully follow-through with staff. This will help to reduce the risk of misunderstanding, confrontation or grievance and will also encourage a more collaborative relationship.

At home

These tips can go a long way to improving your outcome so use them when planning sensitive discussion with a partner or family member. Being part of a close relationship means having to deal with conflict and passions. Having a strategy can help to keep you focussed and prevent the conversation getting out of control. Ask yourself the following:

Is it necessary to raise it all?

Only you can tell. Some couples manage very well by never raising sensitive issues. If it is imperative that you talk about it talk about then make sure that it doesn't sound like finger-wagging or an accusation.

Who is this for?

Sometimes the 'issue' has more to do with oneself than it has to do with the other person. If the conflict is inside you, don't try and pass it off as a

relationship issue. If our own identity or sense of self-worth that is feeling threatened by an event then it will be hard to have a fruitful conversation with others until we have sorted out our own thoughts and feelings. Ask yourself: What is my goal and what would I like to accomplish? Picture your desired outcome and use this as a reference point to help you stay focused.

What is your goal?

What do you expect to happen as a result of your conversation? Know what you are aiming for and keep it in mind. Picture outcome you want and use this to help you stay focused (like a point on a compass). If it requires someone to change is the other person capable of doing what you ask? Will they need support or to learn something new? Go for small steps, one thing at a time.

Time and place?

If it is important then you'll need space and a safe environment to talk about it. Possibly an evening out or a cup of coffee away from the hurly-burly of life. Many couples simply don't allow themselves enough uninterrupted time together to work through the inevitable irritants that crop up.

Consider making an appointment

I know, this sounds a bit formal. Telling the other person you have something that is important to you that you'd like to discuss, and deciding between you when and where to do it, is probably going to be more effective than simply launching into whatever you want to say.

What type of conversation is it?

Is it to give information ("You have bad breath"), to ask for help and support ("I'd really like your opinion..."), to ask them to change ("I wonder if we can find a different way to do X")? Whatever it is, know your purpose and make sure you communicate it.

Affirm the relationship

Tell the other person how important they are to you and why this conversation is important to your relationship. Make it non-threatening and frame it in the context of improvement, not criticism.

Listen to their response and take it seriously

Remember, whatever they say is true for them. Don't turn your well-planned conversation into an argument. You are not obliged to offer a counter argument to their opinion, listen to it, acknowledge it and stay on track with the point you set out to make.

How do you want it to end?

With an apology? A change in behaviour? Have you moved towards your goal? Be prepared to close the conversation as soon as you have, or if it looks unlikely that you will.

Be prepared to be uncomfortable

Sensitive conversations can go on for longer than necessary because of discomfort. The person who initiated the discussion can prolong it in the hope in effect that the other person will say "It's OK, no hard feelings". They won't say this, no matter how long you hang on. Better to close the conversation gracefully as soon as possible to avoid getting into debate. Offer support, a gesture of affection, and stop there.

There are no hard and fast rules for conducting sensitive conversations. These are some pointers, ideas you might like to consider, and they may or may not work for you. Remember that you can't change other people, but you can provide information that'll help them become more aware of something that is causing difficulty. How you present that information will be a decisive factor in success or failure.

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