



BTAC BULLETIN

BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE | LAW ENFORCEMENT & COUNTERINTELLIGENCE | CYBERSECURITY | EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT RELATIONS | THREAT ASSESSMENT & MANAGEMENT

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

LEADERSHIP & INSIDER RISK SERIES

Leaders have a direct impact on an organization's culture, health, and well-being. A vital component of effective leadership is a leader's ability to proactively address difficult topics and behaviors in the workplace. While multiple viable approaches exist for approaching difficult discussions, leaders at all levels can set favorable conditions for future difficult conversations by regularly engaging with employees. One common practice is for leaders to make time to 'walk the floor' to hold short, unstructured, ad-hoc discussions with employees; this approach works to establish trust and set employees at ease with leaders. Ultimately, leaders who have established relationships with personnel are better able to proactively convey priorities and prepare for **difficult conversations**, using the below skills, when those situations arise.

SURVEY

Please take a few to answer our **BRIEF (7-question)** survey to give us feedback on the impact and topic recommendations for future BTAC Bulletin development.

TAKE THE SURVEY

(Right click and copy into a new window)

KEY FACTORS TO CONSIDER IN DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS^{1,3}

Prepare with a clear structure. Techniques like **message mapping** can help clarify the purpose, organize key points, and anticipate questions, ensuring the conversation remains focused and productive. Balance empathy with acknowledgement and keep in mind if it's difficult for you, it's probably difficult for the employee as well.

IMPORTANCE

OF DIFFICULT CONVERSATION SKILLS

Employees may be unwilling to report concerning behavior in workspaces wrought with avoidant problem solving or a lack of transparency. An erosion of trust and negative impacts to employee engagement and loyalty may also occur².

Only 26% of employees believe that their employer adequately handles office conflicts and workplace disputes³



45% of employees say they do not have sufficient skills to have difficult conversations⁴

1. PERSEREC. (2021). *The Art and Science of Speaking Up and Being Heard*. 2. Legal Zoom, *Workplace Insight Report for Businesses 2018*. 3. Stone, Douglas, Patton, Bruce, Heen, Sheila (2023) *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. New York: Penguin Books. 3. Bravely (2019) *Understanding the conversation gap: Why employees aren't talking, and what we can do about it*. 4. Christiansen, J. (2022). *Costly Conversations: How Lack of Communication is Costing Organizations Thousands in Revenue*.

- ❑ **Focus on transparency of processes and acknowledge what you don't know.**
"While I don't know the outcome, I can explain the process and tell you what the next step is."
- ❑ **Avoid extreme words like "always" or "never."**
"I understand this has happened a few times. Do you have a sense of how often?"
- ❑ **Remind them they are not alone. Provide resources and support when indicated**
"I know this is difficult, and I'm happy to work with you to determine what the options are."

- ❑ **Ask clarifying questions.**
"I'm not sure I understand what ____ means. Can you explain it to me?"
- ❑ **Give your conversational partners the opportunity to explain events according to their perspectives.**
"I would like to understand more about _____. Can you tell me more from your perspective?"
- ❑ **Focus on facts and concrete examples when emotions are high.**
"Can you give me a specific example of what happened or concerned you?"

PRIMARY STEPS FOR HIGH CONCERN MESSAGE MAPPING¹

Message mapping can help zero in on the key factors and essentials of clear, concise, and effective risk advisory, awareness, education, and response. Preparation in advance can help one consider potential outcomes of the message delivery.

1. Clarify your purpose. What are you wanting to convey?
2. Identify the interested or affected parties (i.e., stakeholders).
3. List the questions or concerns your stakeholder might have about what you are communicating.
4. Organize and identify common themes from the list of questions or concerns you generated in the previous step.
5. Prioritize your theme and identify a maximum of three key messages that address the theme.
6. Outline no more than three supporting details that target the question or concern's main theme.

