

9 tips for having a difficult conversation over Zoom



While far from anybody's favorite part of the job, being a manager involves sometimes needing to talk to employees about unpleasant topics. From discussing a performance problem or customer complaint, to letting someone know she won't receive a raise or didn't get chosen for a prime assignment, nobody likes presenting news another person does not want to hear.

Typically, a manager conducts these potentially charged meetings in person. Face-to-face interaction lets you read body language and other cues about the listener's comprehension and reaction. Setting up a one-on-one meeting projects an air of seriousness, encourages thoughtful discussion, and reduces the risk of misinterpretation that often comes when employing methods such as email or text.

When possible, modern managers generally continue to summon someone to their office for a difficult conversation. In a hybrid environment, this may mean waiting until the day the employee in question works on site. However, when operating remotely, video conferencing is a necessary substitute. Fortunately, it can be just as viable in setting the tone and getting the job done when the right steps are taken.

If using Zoom for a challenging conversation, set the stage for success with these strategies:

Schedule a mutually convenient appointment

From the get-go, request a private, uninterrupted Zoom meeting. This forethought allows both sides time to create as quiet and distraction-free of an environment as possible. This might involve ensuring children are occupied or setting up computer equipment away from a noisy air conditioner. Likewise, clearing time prevents the need to hurry through the meeting.

Prepare

Even seasoned leaders sometimes experience butterflies during a difficult interaction. Boost confidence and effectiveness by thinking through the situation ahead of time.

“It can be a little scary when you need to have a confronting conversation with someone,” says Cara Lane of the organizational consultancy [34 Strong](#). “Best practices include having a plan and knowing exactly what you want from the conversation. The goal should always be to aim for resolve and a resolution.”

Keep the camera on

People sometimes prefer to use only the audio on a Zoom call. While turning off the camera may be acceptable during large meetings or when giving/receiving general info, important chats benefit from a visual. Request at the beginning that cameras remain on; the whole purpose of choosing a video conference gets lost without them!

Give and expect full attention

Sensitive or emotion-provoking exchanges demand focus and careful listening, especially when participants are not physically together. The odds of missing something said increase when one is scrolling through email or unloading the dishwasher while conversing. In addition to such activities damaging comprehension, they also come off as disrespectful. Refrain from multitasking, even just scrolling through email is more obvious than you realize.

Get to the point

Nervousness leads some managers to beat around the bush, but prolonging the meeting’s purpose usually doesn’t help. In fact, sneaking in uncomfortable information among small talk and efforts to soften the blow can result in the listener missing the point entirely or failing to treat the matter as important. Stay respectful, but stay on course.

Stick with facts

Whether on Zoom or in person, make your case with verifiable evidence rather than vague or opinionated statements. Such presentation clearly demonstrates the problem and avoids the perception that you're simply “picking on” someone. Reading aloud an email from a disgruntled client or citing statistics on a productivity drop delivers useable information in a professional manner; accusing someone of being a slacker who doesn’t care about his work just invites arguments.

Follow standard procedures

If issuing a warning or firing someone, abide by your organization’s disciplinary guidelines. If company policy requires the presence of a union representative or member of HR, include that person on the Zoom call. Complete all related paperwork in a thorough, timely manner. Potential wrongful termination suits won’t accept remote operation as an excuse for sloppy handling.

Don't rush

An uncomfortable topic may spur a manager to talk faster in an effort to get it over with. People receiving negative news, however, benefit from a calmer pace. Clear speech is essential for comprehension, especially over Zoom. Likewise, listeners need the chance to process what they hear.

Allow time for absorbing information and formulating questions, even if this causes some moments of silence. Those extra few beats also help everyone involved keep emotions in check and proceed in a civil manner.

Recap and create a follow-up plan

As things wind down, sum up major points of the conversation in your own words. Ask the other party to add any pertinent comments. These actions verify understanding in case either side missed something during the discussion.

Then, reach an agreement on how to move forward. For instance:

- Someone gets denied a promotion. Outline what she can do to increase chances in the future. What specific skills could she acquire, and how would she go about obtaining this new knowledge? Agree to meet again in six months to evaluate progress.
- Your difficult conversation was the first step in progressive discipline. What behaviors need to change? How will progress be measured? What is the next consequence if the employee doesn't show improvement?

Whether on Zoom or in person, the last thing a manager wants is to go through a difficult conversation for nothing. A detailed, forward-focused resolution sets the stage for the meeting producing something positive in the end.