

Top Tips For Managing Difficult Individuals

1. Get the facts straight

Before having the conversation, make sure you have gathered all the facts. If the difficult conversation is going to be with a service user, prepare any evidence you may need from your case notes. This is particularly important for conversations that may stimulate emotional or defensive responses; collecting the necessary evidence will allow you to discuss the issue in a clear and neutral manner.

2. Clarify the message

The next step should be to clarify the exact purpose of the conversation and what the desired outcome is. Again, if the difficult conversation is going to be with a service user, talk the issues and possible solutions through in supervision first. Consider potential responses and determine exactly how far you are able to compromise on a solution.

3. Consider emotional responses

Take time to think about how the individual may respond emotionally. Present the information as neutrally as possible. If you are a team manager, for example, and you need to talk to a social worker about performance issues, try to ascertain the individual's personal situation and whether they are under any additional stress; this may be the explanation behind behavioural issues. It may also give you an indication of how they are likely to handle the conversation.

4. Consider how you respond to conflict

Think about how your own body responds to conflict. Even if you feel you are able to respond to certain types of behaviour with a calm and rational turn of phrase, remember that feelings such as impatience or annoyance may be communicated non-verbally, through body language and tone of voice.

5. Bite the bullet

If you have identified the need for a difficult conversation, deal with it promptly before the problem escalates. Once fully prepared, find an appropriate time and place to deal with the conversation, where you will not be interrupted, overheard or rushed.

6. Use a productive opening

The opening of the conversation will help to shape the direction of the entire meeting. An unhelpful opening that implies blame is likely to make the individual stressed and emotional. Instead, try summarising the problem and inviting collaboration, for example: “I have been reading through my and I have highlighted some areas I think we need to address – perhaps we could discuss this together?”

7. Be clear about what happens next

Once you have agreed a solution, bring the conversation to a close. In doing so, summarise what the solution is – and why it is satisfactory to both sides – and then agree on who should do what next and if there will be a follow up.