Introduction

This paper outlines some recommended steps in preparation for holding a difficult discussion with a staff member. The steps proposed are very general and specific examples have not been given as every situation is going to present different considerations and 'environmental' factors that will influence the way you will need to approach the discussion. Should you have any concerns or doubts about initiating a difficult discussion with a staff member, consult your HR Manager or Advisor before taking any action.

This paper does not address or mirror any process that is disciplinary in nature or which may require taking subsequent disciplinary action. For specific support in holding Annual Performance Reviews, Disciplinary Meetings, Managing Poor Performance or Managing Conflict, please refer to other resources or contact your HR Manager or Advisor.

This paper identifies three parts to the process of holding a difficult discussion. Firstly, and often the most overlooked, is the preparation and considerations that need to be made before the meeting is scheduled. The second section looks at the actual meeting and the options for how the discussion can be held. The third section explains the importance of following up with the staff member once the initial discussion has taken place. The paper concludes with a checklist to use in preparing for difficult discussions which summaries the various points made in the first two sections.

Part 1 – Before the Meeting

There are four key aspects to consider in preparation prior to any meeting. These are outlined below and depending on the nature of the discussion, these may vary in their importance and the level of influence they will have on the subsequent discussion.

The Person

<u>What is your relationship?</u>

Most difficult discussions are simply between a manager and a member of their staff. However, there are other relationships that may also exist in parallel. For example you may play social sport with the person, or work in collaboration on key projects. It is also important to reflect on the type of meetings or discussions that you have had with the person previously (if any) and how that might contribute to their expectations in meeting with you.

<u>Will your relationship form part of the discussion?</u>

You need to consider what part, if any, these other relationships will contribute to the meeting and how you might transition from an unrelated discussion should it occur.

Types of relationships that exist outside of manager/employee include; friendship, leadership, team members, mentor, colleague, adversary, competitor/rival.

What is their status?

Will this discussion challenge the status of the individual within the department or wider organisation? For example, this may occur in raising performance concerns with someone who is a senior and well respected staff member, or perhaps raising concerns about a person's behaviour and personal communication where they are seen by other staff as the social organiser and confidant.

What is their personality type?

Without going to the extent of doing a personality test on the person, it may be useful to think about how they are likely to respond to the discussion, and whether they will react in a defensive, offensive or offhand manner. This will help you prepare your response to them and how you direct the meeting. It is also a good idea to think about who they are likely to confide in immediately after the meeting. In some (rare) situations, it may be appropriate to talk to that person first, and make them aware of why you are having the particular discussion. This may apply where the person has an assigned mentor or coach, or where they report to another Manager. It is difficult to manage the balance between professional courtesy in talking to this person in advance, while giving equal consideration to expectations of confidence concerning personal matters. It is advised that where you have spoken to someone previously, this is communicated to the staff member.

The Structure

What style of meeting will work best for them and for you?

There are essentially three different styles to consider;

1) *Formal*. A set meeting, usually with an agenda and in a dedicated meeting room, often organised by a third party (PA, Administrator), with the purpose of the meeting set out in advance, and an expectation of written outcomes or minutes.
2) *Semi-formal*. Usually set up in person (face-to-face, phone or email) and held in your office. No minutes or agenda necessary.
3) *Informal*. Setup in person. Held in your office or theirs or even in a coffee shop.

In deciding on the best format it is important to consider the person and the nature of the discussion. No one style is right for all people, for all discussions and for all situations. Don't try and over formalise the meeting if that is not how you normally meet. Equally so, don't set up a coffee meeting if that is not a normal thing for you to do. Remember that in addressing a difficult issue, you may need to have several meetings. Subsequent meetings may change in style. For example when a formal meeting is called, and the outcome might be an agreed series of subsequent "catch-up" or monitoring meetings that are semi-formal or even informal in style.

<u>Location</u>

It is important to ensure the environment is free from distractions and interruptions. Key points to consider in deciding on a location;

1) *Your office* – what will this mean to them, will it send a signal that this is serious or will it intimidate them?
2) *Café or other neutral environment* – can be difficult to manage: the meeting, avoid others joining you, and keeping them focused on the discussion and not what is going on around.
3) *Their office* – will this be seen as respectful or an invasion of their work space?

<u>Single Focus?</u>

Most difficult discussions should be conducted in a single focus meeting. However, there may be times when combining the discussion as part of another discussion or including it as part of another planned meeting is appropriate. For example, if the person's Annual Performance Review (APR) is scheduled in one week's time, it would seem strange to raise issues at a special meeting that would naturally fall within the APR.

Equally, it might be opportune to call a meeting with a wider focus than the specific issue. Where someone has been recently appointed to a leadership role, it may be appropriate to have a meeting to review the role, discuss what challenges they have encountered, and provide them with feedback which might be able to include the "difficult discussion".

The Topic

The consideration here is how to raise the topic. There are three ways in which to present the issue you wish to discuss;

1) *Upfront*. Identify the reason for the meeting, start the meeting by outlining the concerns and invite a response. (If you are conducting a formal meeting, this is the only option.)
2) *Creating a purpose*. This requires getting the individual's buy-in to a broader concept or wider implementation plan, before focusing on them personally. This usually involves seeking their advice (or using a period of consultation) to identify ways in which a wider audience can improve. This identified area for improvement can then, with a level of transparency, become the catalyst for having a discussion focused on them.
3) *Mutually agreed topic*. This is very effective where you are already meeting to discuss something related to the area of concern. This is similar to "creating a purpose" as above, except the purpose already exists – for example in the form of a working group, departmental review, or restructure proposal.

Communication

Is a meeting request uncommon?

In inviting the person to a meeting, will this automatically raise their 'defence' mechanisms, will they expect an agenda, a detailed indication of the issue, a chance to prepare….

Invitation

In considering the above factors – the person, the nature of the discussion, the location and the style of meeting, the invitation needs to reflect these. What will the invitation imply if sent by email, letter, memo, phone, face-to-face and whether if it comes from you personally, your PA, their manager, or an administrator?

Record of the meeting

It is good practice to keep records of meetings (beginning with the request to attend). This can be the actual communication such as a letter, or simply diary notes or calendar entries.

What is said in difficult discussions can often be misunderstood or even misconstrued.

Accurate and transparent records helps avoid and if necessary defend, any subsequent actions or concerns the staff member might raise. Keep notes and records in such a way that you would be happy for the person concerned to read them.

Notice

How much advanced notice of the meeting do you need to give? This depends on the urgency of the issue but as a guideline, for a formal meeting, 2 weeks notice would be the maximum reasonable time. For an informal meeting, dependant on availability of the staff member, 2 days should be adequate notice.

Can they demand representation?

An employee has the right to be represented where their employment terms and conditions are being discussed, or where what is to be raised is an employment relationship problem (or potential problem). An employee does not need to be represented for meetings that are part of their normal work requirements. If in doubt, or if they request to have representation, check with HR before responding.

Part 2 – The Discussion

The recommended approach to difficult discussions is one of "reframing". Essentially this involves considering whether there is a different way of addressing the issue at hand. For example, can a performance issue be adequately addressed as a development opportunity (rather than a performance concern), can a lack of engagement be addressed by seeking the input and advice of the staff member concerned, or can a disruptive staff member have their actions corrected through being given more responsibility/ recognition for their expertise and involvement. This is of course not without risk and the possible outcomes need to be weighed together with the importance and urgency of the issue that needs to be addressed.

There are three approaches to reframing;

1) *Passive* – suggestive in nature
2) *Collaborative* – descriptive in identifying the issue
3) *Active* – prescriptive in what the issue is, and what needs to be done to correct it

The table below shows the three approaches and how they are often closely related to the style of meeting.

Approach	**Meeting Style**	**Technique**	**Discussion**
Passive	Informal	Suggestive	How can **I** help to get this progressed….
Collaborative	Semiformal	Descriptive	**I** need **your** help to make sure that….
Active	Formal	Prescriptive	**You** need to do ……

Just as the meeting style can change from formal to informal for subsequent meetings, the reframing approach can also change. When adopting a suggestive approach, the person may not respond in the desired way, or may refuse to acknowledge any need for change. In such circumstances, moving from a suggestive to a more prescriptive approach is therefore necessary and the transition may even be possible within the initial meeting.

There are numerous acronyms that get attributed to management principles. At the risk of overworking this theme, the simple concept (and acronym) of playing a GAME helps ensure that this kind of meeting actually generates outcomes.

Goal – what is the goal in meeting with them

Achieve – how are they going to achieve this

Measure – what is the measure going to be

Evaluate – how are you going to evaluate if they have met the goal

In recognising that you need to have a difficult discussion, you have already identified the goal or desired outcome and have also likely identified what it is you believe needs to be achieved.

There are a number of tools available for establishing an evaluation process for staff. These include an annual Performance Review, 360% feedback processes, peer-evaluations, annual/strategic planning, setting and reviewing department expectations and departmental reviews. These all provide opportunities to meet with staff and discuss and subsequently monitor a variety of issues that may constitute "difficult discussions".

If the difficult discussion relates to a specific situation, behaviour or performance concerns, (but one that does not constitute disciplinary action), then there are a number of steps to work through. You can choose at what point to involve the staff member depending on the situation and the person concerned, but it may be that you use each of these steps as an outline for a meeting.

1. Define the problem

2. Explore - is it worth solving?

3. Identify the cause

4. Consider available options

5. Agree an action plan

6. Review

When you do involve the staff member in this process/discussion, it is important to remember to focus on the issue and not the person. Once you have described what you perceive is happening and how this differs from your expectations, you will then need to give them an opportunity to respond. This part of the discussion is particularly important as self awareness and acceptance of an issue is often more than 50% of the challenge in implementing change or development. (The rest of the challenge for managing change lies in providing the skills and resources needed and gaining the discretionary effort of those involved through engagement in the process.)

Part 3 –The Follow-up

Record the Meeting

It is essential that you record any 'difficult discussion' meeting, and that it is recorded as soon as possible. How the meeting is recorded is less important than ensuring it is recorded accurately. Typically meetings are recorded as notes which can be written either during or after the meeting, and in the case of formal meetings, these become minutes.

When you take notes during a meeting, the staff member has a right to request a copy of these. For this reason, it is better to ensure that notes are brief and accurate as opposed to selective transcripts of only parts of the conversation.

Follow-up

It is recommended that a follow-up is undertaken within one week of the initial meeting. If this is simply a verbal communication, ensure that it is recorded as an addition to the meeting notes, or in your diary. The follow-up need only be brief, but is designed to show that 1) the issue is important, 2) you have listened to them and 3) you expect to see evidence of outcomes.

The follow-up should reinforce any actions agreed or indicated at the meeting and signal the intention of a further meeting or monitoring.

The follow-up may be as simple as: "Thanks for the discussion on *topic* we were able to have/begin/initiate at our meeting on Tuesday. My understanding is that you want me to do ………….. before we next meet and that you will do …………………..."

Reschedule

Most difficult discussions will require some level of ongoing management (which may eventually be delegated to another manager or mentor). As such the process is more cyclical than linear.

Rescheduling may be linked to an initial follow-up, but could be delayed to allow agreed actions to be implemented.

Depending on whether your meeting was formal, semiformal or informal the terminology is likely to be "catch up", "progress meeting" and "2nd meeting" respectively.

Checklist in Preparing for a Difficult Discussion

Have you considered?

The Person

- how they are likely to respond
- who will they talk to
- how will this affect them

The Structure

- formal, semiformal, informal
- location
- single purpose or part of another meeting

Addressing The Topic

- upfront; or
- create a purpose for the discussion; or
- use an existing or previous discussion to lead in

Communication

- what is the best way to invite them
- who should it come from
- will I take notes or write them afterwards

Approach

- Suggestive – "how can I help to …"; or
- Descriptive – "I need you to do …"; or
- Prescriptive – "You need to do …"

Meeting format

Goal – what is the goal in meeting with them
Achieve – how are they going to achieve this
Measure – what is the measure going to be
Evaluate – how are you going to evaluate it