

# DIFFICULT HR CONVERSATIONS

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Your step-by-step guide to navigating the hardest conversations that HR teams face.

**Namely**  HR for Humans

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# INTRODUCTION

HR teams tend to get a [bad rap](#) as the bearers of bad news within an organization. Be it disciplinary action or organizational changes, they often mediate between company and employee best interests. As a result, HR professionals naturally come face to face with some of the most difficult conversations in the workplace.

Don't be caught unprepared when the time comes. Though it might be tempting to try to avoid these tough conversations, HR must embrace the same strategic mindset used for engagement initiatives and workforce planning. Take the time to understand the difficult situations you might encounter and be prepared to handle the reactions that follow.

In this guide, we'll share four difficult scenarios that require HR intervention, tips for approaching them, and sample language you can use to say the things that may be hard to hear.



**Ready? Let's get started.**

**1**

# **PERSONAL HABITS**

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Where personal meets professional.

## The Situation

We've all been there. A lingering smell, a pattern of inappropriate clothing, or even an observed tendency to re-wear the same clothes day after day. These seemingly personal habits can have a surprising impact on workplace productivity and engagement. [Office smells](#) like perfume, body odor, potent foods, or even alcohol can contribute to discomfort, distraction, and gossip. Similarly, repeated violation of [company dress code](#) or notable disregard for personal appearance can cause of disruption in the workplace.

When employees report that a colleague is exhibiting a lack of hygiene, you'll likely need to address the issue head on.

## The Strategy

**Get the facts.** Document any reports of the problem and try to get a better understanding of the person's habits.

**Keep it one-on-one.** Take care not to embarrass the employee. Be sure to pull them aside for a private conversation.

**Be discrete.** Avoid bringing other colleagues into the discussion. You don't want the employee to feel that they are the subject of office gossip.

**Demonstrate genuine care.** If you show the employee that you truly care about their wellbeing, your conversation is less likely to be perceived as an attack.

**Offer solutions.** Come prepared with suggestions and listen for a solution that makes them the most comfortable.

## The Conversation

Lost for words? Here is some sample language to help you kickstart the conversation.

*“I have something I want to mention to you. It’s a bit uncomfortable, and I don’t want to offend you, but you’ve had a noticeable odor lately. Do you know what might be causing this? Is there anything I can do to help?”*

*“I’ve noticed that recently you’ve been wearing clothes that fall outside of our dress code guidelines. As you know, our office is a casual environment, but we do need you to look put-together and professional.”*

### HR’S TAKE

“It can be challenging to address personal care issues with an employee. In one situation, the smell was preventing others from working with an individual. I asked him if things had changed at home and then told that there was a noticeable odor. He then said he was having plumbing issues and didn’t have a shower he could use.”

**- Anonymous  
HR Director**

# 2

# FAMILY HARDSHIPS

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When life tips the work-life balance scale.

## The Situation

We typically spend 40+ hours per week at work, so it's almost impossible not to bring personal issues into the workplace. This is especially true when you're going through something particularly traumatic. A family loss, a painful divorce, or even a battle with addiction can't simply "go away" between the hours of 9 and 5. It typically falls on HR to help the employees find the most comfortable path through personal hardships like these.

## The Strategy

**Don't pry.** You should never directly ask about an employee's hardship, but there will be times where it inevitably comes up or the employee reaches out for help.

**Listen.** Sometimes making time to listen is all you need to do. While you're not a therapist, you are there to [support employee wellbeing](#) in a safe atmosphere.

**Explore company policies.** Until experiencing a hardship themselves, employees may not be aware of the benefits your company offers specifically for these types of situations.

**Establish Boundaries.** Clearly separate work and personal life so individuals know not to confuse any support with favoritism or preferential treatment.

**Make them comfortable.** Whether they need to work remotely a few times a week, use their lunch hour to attend counseling, or rearrange some of their responsibilities, you can help make work more manageable during a crisis.



## The Conversation

Finding the right words is challenging even when you're a friend, but as a representative of the company it's even harder to strike the balance between genuine care and corporate support.

*"I'm glad you came to me, and I'm here for you. Is there anything I can do to help make your life easier?"*

*"I know you're going through a tough time, what are some ways we could work together to make you more comfortable at work?"*

*"How are you today? I'm free for the next hour if you'd like to talk."*

*"I want to respect your privacy, but I'd love to hear more if you feel like sharing."*

## HR'S TAKE

"Years ago, one of my employees told me that he was addicted to heroin, had been disowned by his family, exhausted our medical outpatient rehab treatment, and was resorting to extreme measures to help pay for his habit. I was able to work with our CEO to get the company sponsor his in-patient rehab on the condition that he would repay the money either through payroll deductions if he returned or be liable for repayment if he didn't return. We sent him to rehab, and he then returned to work clean and sober and repaid the money to the company. I loved working at a company that allowed us to do something that helped our employees through difficult times. I absolutely believe we saved his life. It is our people that matter and it makes me proud to practice HR."

**- Anonymous  
HR Consultant**

# 3

## MANAGING UP

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Giving feedback to senior leadership.

## The Situation

It's hard enough to give negative feedback to a direct report, but HR is the source of truth for employees and leadership alike. HR conducts entry interviews, engagement surveys, exit interviews, and generally keeps a pulse on the organization. This means HR representatives sometimes have to deliver critical feedback to the C-suite. When you do have to deliver constructive criticism, be sure to keep the following tips in mind.

## The Strategy

**Be constructive.** The point of sharing this feedback is not to scold or chastise, it's to help create a better work environment. Use specific examples and avoid generalizations about the leader's personality as a whole.

**Come with solutions, not problems.** Leaders rarely want to hear problems without a suggested solution, and this holds true even when the problem is them. Come with ideas to resolve any issues you want to bring to their attention.

**Let data be your guide.** Use data to de-personalize any negative trends or comments. [The numbers don't lie](#) and can't be interpreted as an attack on character.

**Show the business impact.** Make sure the leadership team understands the problem's impact on the business. Be it hiring, engagement, or retention, these all carry a cost that could be reduced or avoided by addressing the problem.

## The Conversation

When presenting to leadership, it's all about *how* you say it. Try these approaches to delivering negative feedback to upper management.

*"I like your direct honesty, but I wish you would consider the way it comes off to some of the newer employees. I wonder what would happen if you took a little extra time to explain the reasoning behind some of your feedback. I bet in the future they'd produce better work."*

*"You may not have seen this first hand, but when you do this in meetings, it has a negative impact on company morale."*

*"We have higher turnover this quarter and according to the surveys, it's because employees don't feel like their ideas are valued. Here's what I think we could do to address that..."*



# 4

# LAYOFFS & TERMINATION

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Parting is such sweet sorrow.

## The Situation

Whether you have to terminate an under-performing employee or lay off part of the workforce, letting employees go is never an easy conversation. While the circumstances of a layoff and termination are different, the conversation will likely follow the same main points and reach similar emotional highs and lows. Employees who are let go can experience a range of emotions, and often HR is asked to act as a representative of the company to reduce any perception of individual bias in the decision.

## The Strategy

**Don't blindside.** Give employees the courtesy of a little foresight. Layoffs can be sudden, but transparency is key to minimizing their sting. Firing an employee should never come as a surprise. Under-performing employees should have the opportunity to improve under a performance improvement plan.

**Be honest.** No good comes from sugar coating the facts when you let someone go. If it was truly no fault of their own, make that clear and offer support as they transition. If they failed to turn their performance around after a period of fair warning, give them clear feedback about why you ultimately need to part ways.

**Be prepared.** You never know how someone will react to being let go. Anger, sadness, and disbelief are common reactions to the shock of a termination or layoff. Make sure you have a plan in place to handle each of these situations.

**Always do an exit interview.** Even when firing an employee, you should [understand what went wrong](#). How could you have better supported them? What did they like about working there? What would they change?

## The Conversation

This is probably the hardest conversation to initiate, so phrasing it properly is crucial to producing the most optimal result.

*“As you know, we’ve talked several times about your performance. Last month’s report indicated that you’re still not hitting quota. We have decided that a change must be made, and as of today your employment has been terminated. Do you have any questions?”*

*“I must inform you that your position with the company is being eliminated. We are going through a time of reorganization and this means you are being laid off. This decision was made after long and careful review of options.”*

*“I understand that this is a lot of news to take in. When you’re ready, we will go over the details of the rest of your time here, as well as what resources we can provide to assist your transition.”*

## HR’S TAKE

“The most difficult conversations we’ve had are those letting team members go from their positions. It can be unnerving when you aren’t sure how they will react. The best approach we’ve found is to keep up with all team members and have discussions with clear expectations, resources, and deadlines for change that is needed. Make sure to have written document that the team member can access. This way, if you do have to let them go, it is not a surprise and it’s completely data driven, not emotional.”

**- Anonymous  
HR Director**

# 5

# CONCLUSION

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Ready? Set. Go!



# CONCLUSION

No matter the conversation, the same principles apply in each scenario: proceed with empathy, authenticity, and professionalism. As an HR practitioner, you act as representative of both the company and its employees, so make sure you treat employees as you would want to be treated.

Approach your interactions with honesty and genuine concern for employee wellbeing. With this mindset, you will foster employee trust and contribute to a culture where employees and leaders alike feel comfortable having these difficult conversations with HR.

