



# Having Sensitive Conversations

Managers need to know how to spot the signs that someone they work with might be unwell. Having sensitive conversations helps managers find out what, if anything is wrong and act quickly. Read here to find out more about spotting the signs, having sensitive conversations, maintaining boundaries and looking after your own mental health.

## Creating a culture of openness and trust

An organisation's culture is created by the people who work there. The actions of senior leaders are important as they set the tone and others follow where they lead. As a people manager you are also a leader. How you behave creates the culture for your team and the organisation in which you work.

**“People make choices and choices create culture”**

To create a culture of trust and openness you have to choose getting to know your team members. If they know you, they will talk to you. If you know them, you will be able to spot signs that they might not be well.

## Spotting the signs that someone might be in mental distress

There are signs that you can look out for that might indicate that someone who works for you is not well. These could be the way in which the person behaves or physical symptoms. None of these behaviours alone indicate that someone might be experiencing



mental ill-health but you should be wondering whether something might be wrong if the behaviour is out of character, or unusual for that individual, or it carries on for a long period of time.

This can be more difficult if you do not work in close proximity. In these cases, it is all the more important to have regular catch-ups and to get to know the people you work with – wherever you and they are based.

### **Behaviours:**

- Not getting things done e.g. missing deadlines or forgetting tasks.
- Erratic or unpredictable behaviour.
- Emotional responses such as irritability, aggression or being tearful.
- Complaining of lack of management support.
- Being fixated with fair treatment issues.
- Complaining of not coping with workload.
- Being withdrawn from colleagues and not participating in conversations or out of work activities.
- Increased consumption of caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and / or sedatives e.g. coming to work with frequent hangovers or seeming to drink a great deal at out of work events.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Being indecisive.
- Having difficulty remembering things.
- Displaying a loss of confidence.
- Unplanned absences either as sickness or just during the working day.
- Getting into arguments or conflicts with team members / managers.
- Being quick to use grievance procedures.
- Increased errors and / or accidents.

### **Or alternatively:**

- Taking on too much work and volunteering for every new project.
- Being adamant that they are right and know the right way to do things.
- Working too many hours e.g. being the first in and the last to leave and sending emails late at night and on days off.
- Being louder or more exuberant than usual.

### **Also look out for physical / physiological signs such as:**

- Being tired all the time.



- Taking time off sick.
- Being run down and getting frequent minor illnesses.
- Having headaches.
- Reduced reaction times e.g. when driving or operating machinery or responding to questions.
- Complaining of difficulty sleeping.
- Weight loss or gain.
- Dishevelled appearance or not taking the same care over appearance as usual.
- Gastro-intestinal disorders.
- Rashes.

## It's Good to Talk – having sensitive conversations

If you have spotted that someone is not themselves or appears to be distressed you need to talk to them as soon as possible. This can seem daunting and you might be worried that you will make things worse. Don't worry – you won't as long as you prepare for the conversation.

### Before the conversation

Do your homework and find out:

- What your organisation's mental health and reasonable adjustment policies say. If the person needs an adjustment, what is the process that you need to follow and is there someone who can help you with it?
- What do you have the authority to do yourself e.g. can you authorise working from home or a later start to the working day?
- What support does your organisation have to offer such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) or debt counselling services?
- Make a list of all the things that have concerned you with dates and times. If you are concerned about sickness absence, lateness or missed deadlines, keep a record of the dates and times and reasons given by the person by way of explanation.

Don't worry if you are asked something you don't know during the conversation. Just say that you don't know but you will find out.

### Choosing the time and place

Time and place are very important.

- Choose a time when you know that both of you can speak without distractions. If one of you has to rush off to another meeting then you won't be able to give this conversation your full attention.



- Try to make the meeting face to face if you can but pick a quiet space where you won't be overheard and preferably seen.
- If you can't meet face to face try to Skype or Facetime or speak on the 'phone when you can both be in quiet and private places.
- Try not to cause any alarm by making the meeting seem out of the ordinary. Don't send the meeting request with high importance or suggest that you have something urgent that you need to talk about but don't put off having the conversation either. A casual "let's have a catch-up" and then fixing a time and place is best.
- Don't choose a time just before a non-working period. This will avoid a long wait while they worry if you need to come back to them on anything.

## At the meeting

- If you are meeting face to face try to sit so that you are at right angles to each other rather than facing each other across a table interview style.
- Shop floor or coffee shop? Think about your relationship with the individual and don't be afraid to move the meeting off-site if it would be more appropriate to do so.
- Some people find it easier to talk when they aren't looking at the person directly so you could suggest a talking and walking meeting if you think that would be more effective.
- Start with an open question – "how are you?" Be prepared though for the reply "I'm fine". Be ready to say "I'm concerned that you're not fine because" and then have examples ready e.g. yesterday afternoon I thought you were going to cry in the meeting or you've missed several deadlines recently and that's not like you or you were you've had X number of days off sick in the last two months. Be prepared to give concrete examples.

## Be prepared for the response

- Some might respond defensively and you will need to reassure them that this is not a disciplinary meeting. Tell them that you want to help if you can.
- Others might cry. If they do just let them cry. Sitting and waiting while someone cries is difficult but try to resist the temptation to rush to get water or tissues or assistance. Let the person collect themselves and ask gently if you can carry on. If they say no, then say you'll fix another time in their diary to carry on with the conversation.
- The person might get angry. Try to remain calm and reassure them that this is not a disciplinary meeting and you're trying to help.
- Some people will have great insight into their own mental health condition and be willing to talk to you if given the opportunity.
- In other cases the person might insist that there is nothing wrong and that they are fine. They might apologise and assure you that any past performance or behaviour issues won't happen again. You will have to accept this but if the situation doesn't improve you will have to arrange another meeting to talk about their performance or conduct. At



that meeting they need to understand that if they don't tell you what's wrong you can't help them and the next step might be performance improvement measures.

- How much they tell you can depend on how much they trust you and the culture of your organisation. Will they be supported or is this a route out of a job?

**Remember you don't need to have all the answers.** It's okay to say that you will find out and get back to the person. If you need to talk to someone else in the organisation e.g. HR, tell the individual this and ask them how much you can share with HR.

**Don't leave the person hanging.** If you have to arrange another meeting, or to get back to them about something, put a date in their diary as quickly as possible so they know when you will talk to them again. Try not to leave them hanging over a long weekend and try not to cancel the meeting you have scheduled with them. If you do have to cancel or postpone give them your reasons and reassure them with a new date and time to talk.

## Maintaining boundaries

You also have a responsibility to yourself to stay well and professional in the workplace. It is your job to talk to people who work for you about how they are feeling but it isn't your role to become their best friend and you are certainly not their therapist. It is important to maintain boundaries at work. This is true even if you socialise with colleagues you manage outside work. You are still their manager.

It isn't always easy to maintain those boundaries. If you ask someone how they are, they might tell you about problems they are having at home which are causing or contributing to their mental wellbeing. Do listen – but keep focused on your role as their manager. Always bring the conversation back to work by saying something like “I'm sorry to hear that. Is that why you were late for that meeting? What can we do to make sure that doesn't happen next week?”

If you get too drawn into someone's personal life it can be difficult to make the decisions, you need to make as a manager. It can also start to impact on your own mental wellbeing. The one thing you really must not become is a pseudo psychologist or therapist. Even if you are a highly qualified mental health expert, your job as the person's manager is different and a blurring of those boundaries can be counterproductive. If you have an Employee Assistance Programme suggest that they talk to an adviser. They can also see their doctor

Remember that all of the advice in this guide also applies to your manager. You need to be able to talk to your own manager and feel that you will be supported. If they haven't read it perhaps you could give them a copy.



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