



Navigating Employee Exit Conversations

Communications, including difficult conversations, are a big part of the corporate world. While these may seem like just another conversation or *part of the job*, employees tend to experience a range of emotions that could have negative impacts on both the individuals involved and the organization. Tessa Desatnik breaks down how employers can turn a difficult employee exit conversation into productive and empathetic discussion.

From an employer perspective, successfully exiting an executive from your organization can be a difficult and emotional undertaking. Often, the challenge lies in navigating the ups and downs when breaking tough news and knowing how to effectively communicate throughout the process.

In this piece, I identify key behaviours, specifically the dos and don'ts, that can contribute to an amicable and productive conversation. Communication is key, and in this article, we'll break down the dos and don'ts to make it as smooth as possible.

Let's start with the dos:

- **Emotional Preparation:** Before the meeting, prepare and compose yourself emotionally. This conversation is not easy, so brace yourself. This is not a conversation to be taken lightly.
- **Focus on the employee:** This is about the individual, not you. The person receiving the news should be the focal point. Avoid being apologetic or minimizing the impact of the decision.
- **Structure the Conversation:** Make sure the meeting follows a structured process to ensure clarity. Remember, it's not a performance appraisal. Keep it concise, professional, and productive.
- **Have a Clear Message:** Prepare a clear and concise message, avoiding unnecessary repetition. You do not

want to awkwardly extend the meeting or leave things open to interpretation.

- **Maintain Reasoning:** Explain the reason for the individual's exit then introduce and offer resources and an HR contact to allow further support or clarification, post-exit.
- **Stay Focused:** Keep your focus on delivering the message respectfully and avoid negotiating or making unfulfillable promises in the heat of the moment.
- **Express Gratitude:** Don't forget to thank the person for their time and service. This may seem trivial, but genuine gratitude goes a long way.

Now, let's look at what not to do:

- **Avoid Clichés:** Refrain from using clichés like, "time heals all wounds." Instead, express genuine care and empathy." Instead, try saying, "I know it's hard. I don't have the right words to say, just know that I care."
- **Dismiss Feelings:** Avoid telling the person to *be strong*. Acknowledge that change is hard and reassure you are here to support them. Let them feel how they feel in the moment.
- **Assume You Know:** Don't say, "I know how you feel." Everyone's experience is different and maybe you *don't* know how it feels. Instead, say, "I understand this must be difficult for you."
- **Empty Sayings:** Refrain from making statements, such as, "Everything happens for a reason." It's not comforting, and it downplays the situation. Instead, acknowledge the difficulty of the situation.
- **Give Advice:** Don't suggest that talking about it will help. Be a *heart with ears*. Don't give unwarranted advice and instead, validate and listen to what is shared.
- **Create Hostility:** Avoid threats or creating a hostile environment. It's unproductive and insensitive. Keep the conversation respectful and avoid becoming defensive or argumentative.

In the end, it's always difficult to manage employee reactions, especially when it comes to receiving bad news. Emotions tend to lead the way during an exit conversation, and it's the employer's responsibility to lead the conversation respectfully, understanding that the news might come as a surprise. Either way, the employee will need time to fully process their feelings through this challenging situation.

By learning how to effectively navigate these reactions, you can turn difficult conversations into respectful and somewhat positive interactions.

Our Contributors

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