

# Managing Challenging Conversations: A Guide for Reviewers

## The Importance of Early Intervention

As an Academic Manager or PI, navigating difficult conversations is a critical skill for maintaining a healthy research environment. Within the NDS, these conversations are most effective when they happen as and when needed, rather than waiting for the annual Career Development Review (CDR).

Addressing issues early prevents minor concerns from escalating into significant performance or behavioural problems. While these discussions can feel daunting, they are fundamentally an act of respect and a vital part of supporting a researcher's professional growth.

## What to do

Most managers say that they find it difficult to talk to individuals about:	Some conversations are difficult because:
Under-performance; Unacceptable behaviour; Personal habits that affect the team; Low-level but persistent 'taking liberties'; 'Jokes' that aren't really jokes; Constant excuses for why things aren't done.	The other person is nice, "how can I tell them they're not very good at this?" "I am nice – I don't want to seem nasty." "They might get angry/ cry/ leave/ shout/ stop speaking to me ..." etc. etc.

## Why Conversations Feel "Difficult"

Most managers find it challenging to discuss under-performance, unacceptable behaviour, or persistent missed deadlines. These conversations often feel difficult because:

- **Emotional Anticipation:** We expect a heightened emotional reaction (anger, crying, or silence).
- **Assumptions:** We assume telling someone the truth is "nasty" rather than helpful.
- **Nice vs. Effective:** We worry about appearing unkind to a colleague who is otherwise "nice."
- **The HR Team's Perspective:** Dealing with emotions is a key part of success. Reaction is positive, it shows the individual cares about their work and their role within the University.

# The Quality of the Conversation: A Structured Approach

Effective challenging conversations are not "tick-box" exercises; they require a structured, non-directive coaching approach to build clarity and confidence.

## Using the 5-Step Structure

### Step 1: State Your Reality (EEC Feedback)

- **Example:** Give specific, factual examples of what you have noticed. Avoid assumptions.
- **Effect:** Explain the impact this behavior has on the team, the research project, or the individual's career progression.
- **Change:** State clearly that a change is needed and invite them to discuss how to achieve it.

### Step 2: Listen to Their Reality

- **Listen First:** Spend more time listening than talking to understand their perspective.
- **Do Not Interrupt:** Allow the individual to explain their side fully, even if they become emotional or "rant." This models professional behaviour.

### Step 3: Explore the Difference (Dialogue over Dispute)

- Move from a conflict-based mindset to one of mutual exploration.
- **Use open questions:** "I thought X happened, but you saw it as Y. Can you see how others might interpret that action as Z?"

### Step 4: Resolve and Set SMART Objectives

- Identify areas of agreement and disagreement.
- Propose a resolution and invite them to suggest solutions first, as these are more likely to be implemented.
- Ensure any agreed-upon changes are turned into SMART objectives (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-based).

### Step 5: Check-In and Follow-Up

- Difficult conversations are not "hit-and-run" events.
- **Maintain Momentum:** Schedule regular 1:1 meetings to review progress against the agreed-upon changes.

## Handling Emotional Reactions

- **Crying:** Give them time to settle, offer a tissue, and suggest a 15-minute "time-out" or picking up the conversation the following day.
- **Shouting/Anger:** Stay calm and professional. If they are rude, remind them of the need for professional conduct within the department. Offer to resume the discussion once emotions have cooled.

## Documentation and Accountability

- **Effective Notes:** Always capture factual, accurate, and professional notes of when you met and what was agreed upon.
- **Email Follow-Up:** After the meeting, send a copy of these notes to the individual. This ensures there are "no surprises" and that both parties have a shared understanding of the next steps.
- **System Recording:** If the issue relates to broader career development or performance goals, ensure the final outcomes are reflected in the 'My Development' module in HR Self-Service.

## When Further Support is Needed

Having a difficult conversation is not a guarantee that things will change, but avoiding one guarantees they will not. If you have made the needs for change clear and have provided support, but see no improvement:

- **Signpost Early:** Talk to your own line manager or the HR Team ([recruitment@nds.ox.ac.uk](mailto:recruitment@nds.ox.ac.uk)) for advice on formal next steps.
- **Specialist Support:** If the difficulty arises from a career "pivot" or a lack of specific skills, refer the researcher to the Careers Service or People & Organisational Development (POD) for tailored coaching.

**Note:** For more information on maintaining regular dialogues, please see the *Guide for Reviewers - Effective One-to-Ones* or refer to the departmental *CDR FAQs*.