



## **XpertHR Weekly Podcast**

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- Laura Merrylees: Hi and welcome to this week's XpertHR podcast with me, Laura Merrylees. Now, having difficult conversations with employees is part and parcel of being a line manager, but many managers dread and avoid them, often preferring to send an email rather than having a face-to-face meeting with the employee. However, line managers can learn the skills and gain the confidence to tackle difficult issues with employees. With me to discuss this is senior employment law editor, Bar Huberman. Bar, first off could you take us through some of the areas where managers fall down when having a difficult conversation with an employee. [0:00:41.0]
- Bar Huberman: Well one common mistake is for managers to skate round the issue, rather than confronting it head on. So, say a manager, let's call him Rob, needs to give his team member, Adam, constructive feedback about how he dealt with a customer. Rob, like many other managers, might approach this by having a one-to-one meeting with Adam, but might go overboard with positive comments first, or belittle the issue, so as not to offend Adam.
- Laura Merrylees: And this sort of approach could lead to misunderstandings, though, couldn't it? So what should Rob do in this situation? [0:01:12:0]
- Bar Huberman: Yes. It's partly about adopting a certain frame of mind. If Rob doesn't convey the seriousness of the issue to Adam, then he's unlikely to take on board its significance. So, while positive comments can be useful, you shouldn't let this cloud the message and don't belittle the issue either, because this could result in the employee not taking it seriously. You need to be clear about the issue and explain what the employee should do differently next time.
- Laura Merrylees: And getting emotional during a difficult conversation is another common mistake, isn't it? But it's an easy one to make, especially if the manager is disappointed in the employee. Why is it important to avoid getting emotional? [0:01:46.5]
- Bar Huberman: Well remaining calm and professional will help the manager to get the message across and it will also encourage the employee to speak openly. Letting personal feelings get in the way can cloud the manager's judgment as well and create an appearance of bias.
- Laura Merrylees: So one of the things that managers can do is to remain calm and avoid blame, isn't it? [0:02:04.5]

Bar Huberman: Yes. It's important for the manager to focus on the issue, rather than the person. So that means not expressing an opinion about the employee's personality, sticking to the facts and avoiding generalisations. Also adopting a constructive manner, such as saying that you want the meeting to have a positive outcome, and exploring a way forward with the employee, rather than telling him or her what's going to happen, can help and encourage joint ownership of the issue.

Laura Merrylees: And presumably adopting neutral body language and a calm tone of voice will help, too? [0:02:33.4]

Bar Huberman: Sure. There are simple things that managers can do to keep the meeting professional. So not crossing your arms and not speaking loudly, for example.

Laura Merrylees: And what should you do if an employee reacts badly, though? Say a manager, Helen, is telling Vicky that she hasn't been selected for a promotion and Vicky becomes upset or angry. What should Helen do then? [0:02:52.8]

Bar Huberman: In this situation, Helen should remain calm, but allow Vicky to vent her anger or frustration. This will help to give her a feeling of being listened to. It would also be sensible to explore with Vicky why she hasn't been selected for promotion, perhaps asking her why she thinks this has happened. Helen and Vicky could then agree a plan of action together. So perhaps they could make a list of what Vicky needs to improve on, and build a development plan around this, including any organisational support that will help Vicky to improve, with a timeline. And Helen should end the meeting by explaining that she wants Vicky to succeed.

Laura Merrylees: Yes. So, Bar could you just give us your three top tips for handling difficult conversations? [0:03:32.7]

Bar Huberman: Sure. So starting at number three, make sure you have the setting right. If it's going to be a difficult conversation, then it's probably going to need to be in private. Tip number two would be don't put the conversation off.

Laura Merrylees: Yes. And for many managers the mere thought of talking to an employee about a difficult issue is enough to put them off doing it. But often, in fact, not having the conversation can make things much worse, can't it? [0:03:54.8]

Bar Huberman: Yes, that's right. So let's give an example. Harry works in a telephone-based customer service role and his hours are nine to five, Monday to Friday. But he has arrived at work ten minutes to half an hour late every day for the past week. His manager, Sarah, hasn't spoken to him about this yet because otherwise he is a good employee and she doesn't want to seem unnecessarily strict. But this might give Harry good grounds for thinking that, actually, it's okay to be late and it becomes the norm. If Sarah then decides to address Harry's time-keeping later on, he might have reasonable grounds for getting upset or angry because he's been led into a false sense of security. All of a sudden this has become a big issue, when it could

have been nipped in the bud with a quiet word on the first day that Harry was late to work.

Laura Merrylees: And, presumably, if Harry is seen to be given more leeway than others, this could lead to a loss of respect among the team for Sarah as the manager, for not dealing with the situation and also bad feelings towards Harry? [0:04:45.5]

Bar Huberman: Yes, absolutely.

Laura Merrylees: Okay. So going back to your top tips, what's your number one tip? [0:04:50.6]

Bar Huberman: Well my top tip is to be prepared. Because this is the best way to give you the confidence to handle the conversation. This might mean making notes about what you want to say, so that you can put it in the right way and not worry about saying the wrong thing. It would also help to think about what the ideal outcome of the conversation would be. So, if you're talking to an employee about her absence record and you want to achieve an improvement, you could use open questions, such as, 'Tell me about...' and, 'How do you think...' to explore a way forward together. Other ways to prepare for the conversation are gathering relevant information before the discussion, so that you have the evidence to back up your points. And, for some people, it means practising what you're going to say beforehand, even though you might feel a bit silly doing it.

Laura Merrylees: These are all really good practical tips, but how can HR teams get their line managers to do all of this, bearing in mind that many managers are promoted and end up managing a team not, in fact, for their managerial skills, but for their technical skills? [0:05:44.3]

Bar Huberman: Well training in handling difficult conversations is essential, and our line manager briefing should help. It's accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation to help deliver the training. And of course you can adapt the line manager briefings and include lots of opportunities for delegates to practise their skills with one another. That will help to give them the confidence to deal with real life difficult scenarios in the future.

Laura Merrylees: Absolutely. Well thanks ever so much, Bar, for those useful tips on tackling difficult conversations confidently. You can find the line manager briefing that Bar mentioned by going to the tool drop down menu on the XpertHR home page, and clicking on line manager briefings and then clicking on the communication category. So that brings us to the end of this week's podcast, which you've been listening to with me, Laura Merrylees. We're back again next Friday. But until then it's goodbye from us. [0:06:28.8]