



HR DELIVERY

Making Sure HR Delivers

HR DELIVERY WORKSHOP SERIES

Difficult Conversations in HR

An introduction to handling difficult conversations in HR

Build confidence in preparing and holding a sensitive workplace conversation. Practise neutral openings, active listening and clear boundaries through fictional HR situations, then agree realistic next steps while recognising when to pause or seek specialist support.



01 DAY

Introductory taster

IN-HOUSE

Your people. Your context.

PRACTICAL

Explore, discuss and apply

A PRACTICAL STARTING POINT

Understand the topic. Try it in practice.

HR conversations become difficult when expectations clash, emotions rise or the facts remain uncertain. Rushing to reassure or defend a position can make understanding harder. This workshop provides structured practice in preparing a conversation, describing an issue neutrally and listening before agreeing a clear, appropriate next step within the participant's role.

The day gives participants a simple working model and supported rehearsal for everyday sensitive conversations. They practise clear openings, careful enquiry, acknowledgement and boundaries, then reflect on how to record agreed next steps and recognise situations requiring a pause or specialist referral.

WHO IS IT FOR?

HR practitioners, business partners and people managers who hold sensitive workplace conversations and want an introductory practice setting. Participants need no counselling, mediation or investigation qualification to attend.

BY THE END OF THE DAY, PARTICIPANTS CAN:

- 01 Prepare with a clear purpose**
Identify the conversation's purpose, known facts, assumptions and role boundaries before choosing an appropriate setting and opening approach.
- 02 Open without accusation**
Describe a concern or decision neutrally, distinguish observation from interpretation and invite the other person's perspective without prejudging their response.
- 03 Listen and check meaning**
Use open questions, reflection and summaries to test understanding while avoiding premature reassurance, argument or promises beyond your authority.
- 04 Respond to emotion**
Acknowledge the person's experience, maintain a respectful boundary and recognise when a pause or additional support would be appropriate.
- 05 Agree a next step**
Clarify actions, ownership and a realistic update point, checking understanding without implying agreement where an important difference remains unresolved.
- 06 Recognise referral limits**
Identify when a conversation moves into a formal, safety-related or specialist matter that requires appropriate procedures and qualified support.

A useful first application

This introductory practice day concerns everyday sensitive conversations, not mediation, counselling, legal advice or formal investigations. Live allegations, immediate safety concerns and procedural decisions require the organisation's appropriate specialist routes.

THE FRAMEWORK / WORKSHOP FOCUS

Purpose-to-Next-Step Conversation: workshop working model

This workshop working model uses six stages: Prepare, Open, Explore, Acknowledge, Agree and Review. The stages organise practice while allowing a conversation to pause, revisit understanding or move to an appropriate referral.

A PRACTICAL LEARNING AID FOR THIS TASTER

01 Prepare

What is my purpose, authority and evidence for this conversation?

02 Open

How can I explain the issue without assuming motive or blame?

03 Explore

What questions will help me understand the other person's perspective?

04 Acknowledge

How can I recognise emotion while keeping a respectful boundary?

05 Agree

Which next steps can we clarify without inventing agreement or certainty?

06 Review

What should be recorded, followed up or referred for specialist support?

The model is a practical learning aid, not a validated psychological method or formal case procedure. Its prompts support respectful dialogue within role boundaries; participants should follow organisational requirements and seek specialist support when needed.

LEARN BY DOING

Explore. Challenge. Make the ideas useful.

Short explanations lead into lively exercises, paired discussion and small-group challenges. Participants test ideas, share experience and build a draft together. The tone is engaging and enjoyable, with time to reflect and connect learning to real work.

01 Prepare the opening

Participants separate facts from interpretations in a fictional request, write a neutral opening and test it with a partner for clarity, assumptions and promises beyond their authority.

02 Listen without fixing

In timed pairs, one person explains a work concern while the other uses questions and summaries before suggesting action; observers note moments when assumptions replaced listening.

03 Pause and replay

Triads rehearse a conversation that becomes tense, practise acknowledgement and an appropriate boundary, then pause and replay one exchange using specific observer feedback about words and impact.

04 Agree without false agreement

Groups review several endings to a sensitive conversation and rewrite the strongest option to show unresolved differences, practical actions, responsibilities and a realistic update point without premature reassurance.

DIAGNOSE BEFORE YOU ACT

Evidence > shared feedback > agreed priorities

Use selected diagnostic prompts to distinguish known facts from assumptions. Discuss the findings and agree their meaning before proposing a solution. Feedback is part of diagnosis, not an afterthought.

ONE CASE, DEVELOPED THROUGH THE DAY

A manager asks HR to help explain why a requested internal development move cannot proceed yet. The employee believes a previous informal conversation guaranteed the opportunity. The manager has limited notes and wants HR to deliver the message alone. No one has clarified who can authorise the next decision.

Prepare a neutral opening, identify missing facts and rehearse listening to the employee's account. Agree an appropriate next step while making unresolved differences and decision authority explicit.

THE FACILITATOR WILL

- Invite different perspectives.
- Make assumptions visible.
- Welcome constructive debate.
- Capture practical learning.

SAMPLE WORKSHOP AGENDA

A working day, with room to think.

09:00-16:30 | Six hours of facilitated learning, plus lunch and breaks. The agenda, emphasis and timings are always agreed with the client, including local scheduling needs.

09:00-09:20	Understanding what makes it difficult Explore expectation gaps and uncertainty, establish practice boundaries and select personal learning aims using fictional situations rather than live personal cases.
09:20-10:15	Preparing a purposeful conversation Introduce the six-stage working model, separate facts from assumptions and decide the purpose, authority and appropriate setting for the case conversation.
10:15-10:30	Break
10:30-11:30	Opening clearly and neutrally Write and rehearse an opening that explains the issue without attributing motive, making an accusation or promising an outcome beyond your role.
11:30-12:30	Listening before responding Practise open questions, reflection and summaries, comparing what was actually said with the assumptions participants initially made about the other person's position.
12:30-13:30	Lunch
13:30-14:30	Responding when emotions rise Use pause-and-replay practice to acknowledge emotion, hold a respectful boundary and recognise when a break, referral or additional support is needed.
14:30-14:45	Break
14:45-15:30	Agreeing a realistic next step Rehearse closing a conversation with actions, ownership and an update point while clearly recording any important disagreement or question that remains unresolved.
15:30-16:10	Integrating the conversation practice Run a complete fictional conversation in triads and use focused peer observations to improve preparation, listening, boundaries and clarity of follow-through.
16:10-16:30	Preparing a supported application Choose one suitable practice opportunity and identify the colleague, policy checks and referral arrangements needed before applying the learning in the workplace.

Prepare carefully, explore the other perspective and agree a clear next step while recognising unresolved differences.

FROM THE SESSION TO YOUR DESK

Useful models.

Practical working records.

The day combines reference materials with drafts developed in the exercises. Each has a clear use beyond the workshop; the work reflects the evidence and perspectives available in the room.

01 Conversation preparation sheet

A worked case sheet setting out purpose, facts, assumptions, role boundaries and setting, with prompts for identifying missing information before opening a sensitive workplace conversation.

Prepare a focused conversation with the right purpose and authority.

02 Neutral opening draft

A practised opening that describes the issue and invites a response, with peer comments highlighting unsupported assumptions, accusatory wording or commitments outside the speaker's role.

Check the first few sentences before a sensitive workplace discussion.

03 Listening prompt card

A concise selection of open questions, reflections and summary prompts, accompanied by reminders to check meaning before offering solutions or assuming why someone acted as described.

Keep enquiry and understanding present when the conversation becomes uncomfortable.

04 Practice observation notes

Feedback from fictional triad rehearsal on acknowledgement, pacing, boundaries and moments for a pause, giving participants a small number of specific behaviours to practise further.

Choose one observable behaviour to improve with a trusted colleague.

05 Next step record example

An exercise record of agreed actions, owners and updates, showing how unresolved differences can remain visible without implying consent, certainty or a predetermined employment decision.

Close a discussion with clear responsibilities and an accurate record.

06 Referral and practice plan

A personal plan identifying suitable practice opportunities, support colleagues and organisational routes for formal concerns, safety issues or matters beyond the participant's competence and authority.

Apply the learning within your role and seek help early.

CONTINUE EXPLORING

Continue with the models, diagnostic manuals and development resources on the HR Delivery website. Workshop exercises provide a first application; a full organisational diagnostic or implementation assignment can be agreed separately.

[Open the framework >](#)

[Explore diagnostic resources >](#)



MAKE THE LEARNING COUNT

A better conversation. A practical next step.

Start with a suitable everyday conversation and prepare with a trusted manager or HR colleague. Use the prompts flexibly, follow organisational procedures and review your own listening and clarity afterwards. Escalate formal, urgent or specialist issues through the appropriate route.

YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS

01

Days 1-7

Prepare with support

Review your practice notes with a trusted colleague and choose one suitable conversation skill to develop. Check the relevant procedure, your authority and referral options before planning a workplace application.

02

Days 8-21

Rehearse and reflect

Rehearse a fictional or appropriately anonymised opening with a colleague, then apply the skill in a suitable everyday discussion. Reflect on what you heard, how you checked understanding and any unresolved concerns.

03

Days 22-30

Review and continue practice

Discuss learning without disclosing unnecessary personal details. Select one adjustment to your preparation or listening, confirm appropriate follow-up on any agreed action and seek specialist support where the situation exceeds your role.

Follow-through is participant-led. Additional facilitation, a full diagnostic or specialist support can be agreed separately.

AVAILABLE IN-HOUSE

Shaped around your organisation

Agree the in-house date and appropriate practice topics with the client. The facilitator supplies fictional role cards; participants need not share personal experiences or live cases. Confirm local procedures and support routes relevant to sensitive workplace conversations.

PLAN YOUR IN-HOUSE WORKSHOP

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Discuss your workshop



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