

– Tip sheet

Handling tricky conversations during COVID-19

As a manager, you will need to have a difficult discussion about workplace tension from time to time. COVID-19 restrictions could make this even more likely, because:

- the increased stress and anxiety many of us are feeling (and often for very valid reasons) can make it easier to misinterpret other people's communications or actions
- we're all still getting a handle on tech and can accidentally leave people out of the loop on things they'd participate in at work, leaving them feeling excluded and unhappy
- we may be unclear on expectations around performance or availability, and these need to be clarified
- the lack of face to face contact can make it trickier to resolve even minor tensions when they do occur.

The NSW Public Service Commission has prepared a [resource about difficult discussions](#), but this tip sheet discusses how you can manage your team to avoid turning a misunderstanding into workplace tension during COVID-19.

Foster team cohesion

Team cohesion is crucial for an effective and engaged team of employees to succeed, but irregular face to face interaction, over-reliance on email, and a build-up of unresolved issues amongst team members can easily undermine this. Encourage team members to have 'catch-up' time at the beginning of meetings (or just before them so they're opt-in), which fosters stronger interpersonal relationships amongst the team. Dispersed teams will be more effective when social bonds have been developed.

Act early

If issues come up between team members or affect how the entire team is functioning, address the issues up front instead of letting them continue and undermine cohesion. Try to schedule the conversation as soon as possible, once those involved have had a chance to take a deep breath and reflect on what happened. Showing your team that you value their feedback, and that you will take action to promote team harmony and well-being builds trust and engagement. Written communication especially is fallible, and we all find ourselves troubled by things that would never worry us if said in person, so take a leap of faith, show trust, and tackle it directly.

Know thy technology

Ideally, conversations are best done face to face, but current conditions make this impractical for many workplaces. Ask the participants how they would prefer to meet and to consider what's practical and reliable. If the meeting has to be held online, we recommend making full use of video and microphone on the platform you most commonly use, so non-verbal communication is as clear as possible. However, if anyone participating has unreliable tech or finds video conference too confronting to feel relaxed, the conversation will quickly become frustrating and unproductive, so have all necessary phone numbers on standby just in case.

Be proactive about employee needs at this time of insecurity

When you have check ins with your team members about their workload, also ask about their wellbeing in a friendly non-intrusive manner. You may want to step up the number of check ins you have with team members during a period of social isolation and think proactively about how you can encourage them to stay in touch with each other as well. Look out for people who go quiet all of a sudden, participate less, or seem withdrawn – it's tough working at home, especially if you live alone. SafeWork has some great [guidelines about mental health](#) we recommend.

Practise and model self-care

Don't create an expectation of 24/7 availability in the way you model your own approach to work; it will inevitably lead to burnout and high turnover. Communicate your expectations clearly to your team: you expect them to self-manage and use their wisdom to balance meeting deadlines with taking breaks and using flex leave to make up for the extra effort they have put in at times when required. That also means you need to role model this yourself – the saying 'actions speak louder than words' is as valid in remote workforces, as it is in the office.

This tip sheet will be enough to get you started, but if you feel you need more help or to go deeper, post your query on our LinkedIn group, talk to your manager or a trusted peer, or consult with your HR representative to explore any courses your agency may have access to.

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