

Language Matters: Questions to Ask and Avoid

Questions to Ask	Questions to Avoid
How are you doing at the moment?	You're clearly struggling. What's up?
You seem to be a bit down/upset/under pressure/frustrated/angry. Is everything okay?	Why can't you just get your act together?
I've noticed you've been arriving late recently and I wondered if you're okay?	What do you expect me to do about it?
I've noticed the reports are late when they usually are not. Is everything okay?	Your performance is really unacceptable right now – what's going on?
As your manager, what can I do to help?	Everyone else is in the same boat and they're okay. Why aren't you?
What would you like to happen? How?	Who do you expect to pick up all the work that you can't manage?
What support do you think might help?	
Where have you looked for help with this? A doctor, counselor?	

Employee Substance Use: Do's and Don'ts

- DON'T try to diagnose the problem.
- DON'T moralize. Limit comments to job performance and/or conduct issues.
- DON'T discuss alcohol and drug use. Stick to the topic of performance on the job.
- DON'T be misled by sympathy-evoking tactics.
- DON'T cover up. If you protect people, it enables them to stay the same.
- DON'T make threats that you do not intend to carry out. If you threaten disciplinary action, you must follow through

- DO emphasize that you care about the person, and are focused on their work performance
- DO have documentation of work performance when you talk to the employee.
- DO remember that many problems get worse without assistance.
- DO emphasize that the EAP, if applicable, is confidential.
- DO explain that the EAP, if applicable, is voluntary and there to help the employee.
- DO call the EAP, if applicable, to discuss how you make a referral.



Responding to Employee Distress or Mental Health Disclosures

Handling sensitive employee disclosures is often viewed with fear by line managers, but it need not be awkward or taxing.

Remember that the aim is to create an honest and open dialogue that will lead to a system of support and understanding between employers and employees.

Generally a common-sense approach based on open communication and good people management is all that is required. The rules of thumb are:

1. Avoid making assumptions

- It can be difficult for people to disclose information relating to something personal, so make it easier by keeping an open mind and giving them space to talk it out.
- Avoid trying to guess what symptoms an employee might have and how these might affect their ability to do their job.
- Remember, many people are able to manage personal challenges and perform their role to a high standard.

2. Embed confidentiality

- People can be understandably anxious about disclosing something personally distressing, so be prepared to assume responsibility for some confidential and sensitive information.
- Create strict policies about who is made aware of disclosures. As a rule, they should involve as few people as possible.
- Reassure them that any private information they disclose will not be leaked to their colleagues.
- Discuss with the individual any information they would like to be shared with team colleagues and how, as this can be very supportive for some people.

3. Encourage people to talk

- It is important to have an open dialogue with employees when discussing their mental health or other challenges.
- Remember, everyone's life experience is different and how you deal with a disclosure should be entirely dependent on the individual.
- Explore how the situation at the employee's comfort level, what the implications are and what support they need.

4. Respond flexibly

- Crises and mental health problems affect people in different ways and at different times in their lives, so be prepared to adapt your support to suit the individual.
- Remember, workplace adjustments for a personal crisis or mental health condition need not be costly nor require huge changes – they can be simple.
- Be aware of the steps to take if you're concerned the employee may be having suicidal feelings – guide them to seek help from their physician, EAP, or even the emergency room/mental health crisis center.

5. Seek advice if you need to

- If you're still unsure, the person lacks insight or an issue is particularly complex, seek advice from administrative colleagues and supervisors.
- Where workplace relationships are strained or confrontational, consider using workplace mediation to help resolve issues.
- Larger employers may find involving occupational health colleagues useful, as they can support both employees and managers to negotiate issues around disclosure. Remember that once aware of health or disability information, the employer also has legal duties to consider making reasonable adjustments as well as a general duty of care and responsibility for employee health and preventing personal injury.

Supporting Employees:

Possible Adjustments

- Changes to start and finish times
- Change of workspace – quieter, less busy, dividing screens
- Changes to role (temporary or permanent)
- equal amount of break time, but in shorter, more frequent chunks
- extra training or coaching (during work hours)
- flexible hours
- increased supervision or support with managing workload
- lightbox or seat with more natural light
- mediation if there are difficulties between colleagues
- mentor or ‘buddy’ systems (formal or informal)
- phased return to work – reduced hours gradually building back up
- provision of quiet rooms
- redeployment to a more suitable role
- relaxing absence rules and limits for those with disability-related sickness absence
- temporary reallocation of some tasks
- time off for appointments, at short notice if needed
- working from home

Return-to-work Checklist

While the employee is off sick Managers should:

- regularly communicate with the individual via telephone or email, while being mindful not to place undue pressure on the employee to return earlier than appropriate (the approach for all staff must be made clear in sickness procedures)
- consider visiting the employee at home, but only with their consent
- communicate work issues with the individual to keep them in the loop
- focus conversations more on the individual’s well-being

- be in touch with the individual’s close colleagues with regards to their health (only with the individual’s consent)
- encourage work colleagues and other members of the organization to keep in touch with the individual
- make it clear that the individual should not rush back to work
- make it clear that the company will support the individual during their absence
- reassure the individual that their job will be there for them when they return
- prevent the individual from pushing themselves too much to return to work.

The initial return to work Managers should:

- consider giving the individual lighter duties/ different jobs during their initial return to work
- incorporate a phased return to work for the individual, if appropriate
- remain objective when discussing return-to-work adaptations for the individual
- explain the return-to-work process/procedures to the individual before they return
- explain any changes to the individual’s role, responsibilities and work practices
- meet the individual on their first day back
- make the individual’s first weeks back at work as low-stress as possible
- keep in regular contact with the returning employee and regularly ask if they are doing okay.

Managing the team Managers should:

- ask the individual about what ongoing information should be shared with colleagues
- make the individual feel like they were missed by the organization
- encourage colleagues to help in the individual’s rehabilitation process
- promote a positive team spirit

- regularly communicate with HR/occupational health (if this is available) and keep the individual informed.

General behavior Managers should:

- be proactive in arranging regular meetings to discuss the individual’s condition and the possible impact on their work
- communicate openly
- listen to the individual’s concerns
- understand that, despite looking fine, the individual may still be ill
- appreciate the individual’s wishes
- have an open-door policy so the individual can always approach them with any concerns

How do I respond to someone who may be at risk for suicide?

Your response is crucial and may save a life. Don’t wait to be certain the threat is real; it is important to have a discussion with the employee about your concerns, being specific and clear in what you are seeing and witnessing.

In many of these situations, other employees have noticed signs or reported hearing concerning comments and they report it to the manager. When discussing your concerns be sure to:

1. Have the conversation in a private place where you will not be interrupted.
2. Bring up the concerns directly (from what you have witnessed or from what was reported to you).
3. Offer your support and the support of the organization to assist in accessing help as needed. Your conversation could start like this: ***“Steven, I was informed you made statements about not being around anymore while you were with co-workers. This is very concerning for your co-workers and for me, and we want to be sure you are okay. What’s going on?”*** or ***“We want to support you in getting***

what you need. Can we talk about what that might be?”

4. Ask if the employee has had thoughts or intentions of killing themselves. Some people are concerned this may “plant the seed” of suicide if the person has not been considering it. This is a common fear and deterrent for asking difficult questions, however the reality is the effect of asking about it will probably be a relief for those at risk. It gives the employee permission to then talk about the issue and ask for and get help. *Are you thinking about killing or hurting yourself?”* If the answer is “no”, seek clarification of what was said and why. If the answer is vague or “not really”, this must be taken as a “yes” until you are able to seek further clarification on what they mean.
5. Listen to their concerns without giving advice, minimizing their concerns, or trying to “make them feel better.” This is the most valuable thing you can do.

Suicidal Employees: Do Say/Don’t Say

These tips help to break the silence and invites the person to discuss what they are going through. Here are some recommendations about what to say.

Do Say...

- “It sounds like it has been pretty rough for you lately”
- “I’m sorry to hear about your troubles, would you like to talk about it?”
- “Thanks for sharing.”
- “Is there anything I can do to help?”
- “I’m sorry to hear that. It must be tough.”
- “I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”
- “I’m here for you when you need me.”

Don’t Say...

- “It could be worse.”
- “Just deal with it.”
- “Snap out of it.”

- “Everyone feels that way sometimes.”
- “You may have brought this on yourself.”
- “We’ve all been there.”
- “You’ve got to pull yourself together.”
- “Maybe try thinking happier thoughts.”
- “Oh man, that sucks.”

When Domestic Violence Comes to Work

According to the Cambridge Public Health Department, if an employee reveals that he or she is in an abusive relationship, HR should:

- Communicate your concerns for the employee’s safety. It’s important to ask the victim what changes could be made to make him or her feel safer.
- Tell the employee that you believe him or her. “Listening, listening, listening, is really important,” said Angelo.
- Refer the employee to an EAP. “I would strongly advise that the EAP has counselors that specifically deals with domestic violence offenders and victims,” said Angelo. Santiago recommended using a local domestic violence support agency with trained staff.
- Be clear that your role is to try to help and not to judge. “Don’t belittle or criticize the reasons a victim stays or returns to the abuser,” said Angelo.
- Consult with security staff if there is a concern about workplace safety. “Members of the security team should be trained to perform threat assessments, help create individual workplace safety plans, and assist victims of intimate partner violence by providing escorts to and from the office, securing parking and work spaces, screening calls, and providing other services,” said Wells.

RESOURCES:



“Recognizing Mental Health Issues in Your Employees”

https://youtu.be/mABH2vD_e0U

“Supporting Employees with Mental Health Conditions”

<https://youtu.be/K5qMRhvSMCA>