

CONNECTIONS

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Managing difficult conversations under hybrid work arrangements

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We have all experienced how the pandemic has changed the landscape of working life, particularly with the normalisation of working from home. With telehealth becoming a permanent feature of Australia's healthcare system, staff requests to maintain more flexible, or hybrid, work arrangements are becoming even more common.

Hybrid work arrangements generally mean an employee performs part of their work on-site and part remotely. This can promote a greater sense of work-life balance for some employees, and help reduce the risk of Covid-19 transmission in the workplace. However, occupational therapy managers and supervisors can also face human and cultural challenges associated with these arrangements.

When approving new hybrid work arrangements, practice owners need to consider how they will monitor staff engagement and maintain a

good flow of communication and cohesion among the team.

Workplace conflict still occurs when staff work remotely. Communicating via email, phone or video conference can lead to misunderstandings, silences or unconsidered messaging. When individuals cannot resolve conflict directly, employers need to support their staff to communicate openly, find win-win solutions and resolve issues.

To help mitigate staff issues, it is important that team members are reminded of the practice's professional standards and code of conduct around workplace communications, including, for example, the rules of engagement around video conferencing, emails and expected response times. To improve team cohesion, it would also be helpful to provide staff with training to develop their emotional intelligence and gain a better

understanding of the communication styles and personality types in their teams.

A number of situations in an allied health practice will require managers and supervisors to have difficult conversations with their staff. Broad examples include when an employee fails to adhere to lawful and reasonable directions by the employer, when an employee disregards the organisational processes and policies, or refuses to attend work. Practice managers and supervisors should always conduct difficult conversations in a constructive manner, taking a considered approach and using positive language so the employee clearly understands what is expected and what needs to happen next.

Best-practice guidance for managers and supervisors is to facilitate a conversation that is direct, firm and polite, including the following:

- What is expected;
- Tangible examples where the employee is not meeting those expectations;
- Identifiable areas for improvement; and
- What support is being offered to assist the employee.

Employees should always be given an opportunity to discuss and respond to the issue. The option of the employee bringing a support person to the conversation should also be offered ahead of time. Details of the conversation should be

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confirmed in writing, including the timing of any planned actions or reviews.

When employees are working remotely, this can add a layer of complexity to facilitating difficult work conversations. Under hybrid working arrangements, an employee would generally still work on-site some of the time, so it is advisable to plan for difficult conversations in a face-to-face setting where possible. However, if the discussion needs to be had remotely, the following are some factors the manager or supervisor may wish to consider:

- Have I planned what I need to say?
- Have I reviewed any organisational protocols related to the issue?
- How can I create a safe space for this discussion?
- Am I using a secure video conferencing platform?
- Are all parties adhering to confidentiality protocols?
- Are there any unauthorised people present in the room during conversation?
- Are all parties able to maintain good eye contact?
- Do all parties have the opportunity to speak freely and practice active listening?
- What follow-up measures do I need to take?

The practice's performance management procedure is a tool that can be used to help guide managers and supervisors through the process of conducting difficult conversations. Practice owners should ensure the organisational policies and procedures are updated to take hybrid and remote working arrangements into account.

OTA members receive special OTA member benefits through WorkPlacePLUS for support with HR and IR issues. For more information, contact Anna on (03) 9492 0958 or visit WorkPlacePLUS.com.au.