



Cooperative Conversation

From time to time, you may have an issue or concern about your working environment or work relationships that you would like to raise or address.

An effective, early resolution tool is to directly communicate your concern or issue to the colleague by having a respectful conversation – a **Cooperative Conversation**.

Cooperative Conversations can be uncomfortable and challenging. However, positive change can be achieved by approaching the discussion with respect for the other person and with commitment to open communication.

A Cooperative Conversation is a two-way conversation anyone can use to try to resolve a concern they have with another person. Ideally, the courageous conversation allows both parties to understand each other, respectfully discuss and resolve their differences and build the relationship.

The point of a cooperative conversation is to *ensure those you work with know what you want and more importantly, what you don't want. In simple terms, what you are often trying to say is "STOP – I don't like it"*

Refer below for more information on:
Tips on Preparing for a Cooperative Conversation
Cooperative Conversation Template

What are the benefits?

- Concerns can usually be resolved quickly and effectively by using an informal resolution tool like a Cooperative Conversation.
- There is a greater likelihood of resolving the issue positively with the working relationship repaired and maybe even enhancing the relationship.
- Taking the step of having a Cooperative Conversation will usually result in you developing skills to resolve future workplace and/or personal difficulties more quickly by yourself.
- It provides you with an opportunity to understand and empathise with the feelings of the other person(s).
- It can help you to gain an insight into your own behaviour as well as that of others so you can open up opportunities for positive change.
- It helps foster open communication and helps everyone involved find a solution that is fair and considerate of all.
- It gives all parties the best chance to influence the outcome rather than having outcomes imposed (as can be the case with formal resolution tools).

Is it compulsory?

No. Having a Cooperative Conversation is not a compulsory step in Council's Complaint Resolution process.

This is just one of a number of options available to you to consider.

Why should I give it a try?

Everyone has different needs, beliefs, interests and life experiences and as a result, it is inevitable that conflict will occur at work.

Some conflict is good as it's a sign that not everyone is thinking the same way, which can result in better outcomes or new ideas. But when the conflict is impacting negatively on someone it's important that this is resolved quickly.

At its most serious, unresolved conflict can have serious consequences and health concerns for the individuals concerned, as well as for colleagues, family and friends who may be drawn into the disagreement.

Using formal resolution methods (such as an investigation) to resolve conflict can often force people to 'take sides' which may damage relationships making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to resolve.

Other consequences of escalated conflict may include:

- people who stop talking and completely disengage from each other;
- violence and nastiness;
- legal battles;
- people giving up and seeing the situation as hopeless;
- people becoming irrational and making bad decisions;
- the conflict reaches the point of no return; and
- serious psychological and physical health issues.

When is it appropriate?

Cooperative Conversations can help with most types of behavioural or interpersonal issues including -

- communication issues and breakdowns;
- personality clashes;

- breakdown in workplace relationships;
- unresolved or ongoing grievance issues;
- perceived discrimination, harassment or bullying issues;
- differences in working style or approach; or
- perceived inappropriate use of power, status or position

Having a Cooperative Conversation directly with the other person won't always be appropriate. In some circumstances, there will be no choice but to use a formal procedure (e.g. an allegation of serious misconduct such as physical assault).

How quickly should I have it?

Cooperative Conversations work best if you act in a timely manner to address the behaviour or conduct that is upsetting you. It is best to act within a day or two, before memories of the exchange fade and the issue becomes unnecessarily inflated. Whilst it may also be necessary to give yourself some time to cool off if you are feeling emotional, if you wait a week or more before you raise the issue, the other person may be surprised when you raise the grievance.

The earlier in the conflict these types of discussions take place, the more chance there is of a successful resolution. The longer the conflict goes on, the greater the possibility of people becoming entrenched in their own views and the working relationship breaking down.

Who is involved?

These types of discussion are typically held between you and the other party.

It isn't usual to have a Support Person with you during these discussions. However, support and coaching is available to help you prepare and even practice what you would like to say before the Conversation.

If you do require a Support Person, you should tell the other person if you are intending to invite your Support Person to your Conversation.

The information contained below will also help you prepare for the Conversation so you can enter the discussion with confidence.

Is it confidential?

The matters discussed should remain completely confidential between the people involved. Remember that this will depend somewhat on the goodwill of each of the people involved.

It is recommended that during the Conversation, you talk about the need for confidentiality and agree between yourselves that what is said during the Conversation is not shared with anyone else.

If both parties prepare for the Conversation and hold it according to Council's REACH principles, breaches of confidentiality should not arise.

Should I prepare?

Absolutely! The more preparation the better.

In preparing, consider what has happened and why the situation has occurred. This is important because often there are bigger, or related, issues at play and the conflict may be a symptom of these.

During your preparation, try to identify any underlying issues and raise these during the discussion so all issues are on the table and able to be worked through.

Keep the following principles in mind:

- be willing to fix the problem;
- be honest and say what the problem is for you;
- listen to what the problem is for them;
- attack the problem, not the person; and
- look for answers so everyone gets what they need.

More information and tips on preparing can be found on below on this fact sheet.

What support is available to me?

Council's Employee Assistance provider, Converge International, can provide you with emotional or practical support at any time before, during and after the Conversation. A confidential and free onsite or off-site appointment can be made by calling 1300 687 327.

You may also seek the support of –

- your Manager or Team Leader (or other Manager or Team Leader);
- a member of the Organisational Development team;
- the Team Leader, Organisational Development (Council's Equal Opportunity Officer);
- any Director;
- a Union Representative;
- your designated OH&S Representative (in relation to issues of Bullying or Workplace Violence only) (Webstar > OHS > OHS Representatives or noticeboards); or
- an EEO Contact Representative (Webstar > HR Connection > EEO Contact Representatives or noticeboards).

Will it resolve all my concerns?

Hopefully! Resolution is always the desired outcome.

You might notice an immediate improvement in the relationship, or relations may take a period of time to improve because it can take time for behaviours to change.

However, even with the goodwill of all parties and despite everyone's best endeavours, there is no guarantee your Cooperative Conversation will resolve all of your concerns or prevent a re-occurrence of the same behaviour. If the behaviour does not improve (or even deteriorates further, it may be worth reconvening the discussion. Alternatively, you may consider exploring other informal or formal options such as a facilitated discussion, mediation or making a complaint.

Does it fit in with REACH?

Trying to resolve matters informally and between the two parties is very much in line with Council's REACH characteristics.

Remember it is important to also enact the REACH characteristics during and after the Conversation by not gossiping or sharing the outcome with others.

By following the tips contained at the back of this fact sheet to prepare and have the Conversation, you will be sure you are acting in the spirit of the REACH characteristics.

Further information

Further information is available from Organisational Development on 8571 5136.

References

Forbes Management –
www.forbes.com/sites/margiewarrell/2012/11/13/co-urageous-conversation/

Collaborate Australia Pty Ltd –
www.collaborateaustralia.com.au

Resources

Webstar – HR Connection – Employee Support –
Employee Assistance Program (EAP) – EAP Portal

Prepare to have a Cooperative Conversation

Collaborate Australia suggest the following tips for having a Cooperative Conversation:

Talk it over	Talking about the issues is the best solution (providing there is no threat of violence). Communicating with the other party face-to-face is more effective than emails, letters or through third parties. It is also much better than complaining about the conflict to others
Make Time	Approach the other person at a time when neither of you is in a hurry. Choose a time when neither of you are under pressure (such as just on their way to a meeting, having a bad day or when there is a lot of noise or others around). Try creating a neutral environment by having the conversation somewhere you are both likely to feel comfortable with such as over a coffee or away from your normal work location. Select a comfortable, neutral location where you can sit and talk quietly and privately. Explain to the other party that the issue has been worrying you and you would like to resolve it.
Prepare	Prepare ahead of time what you want to say. Writing your thoughts down may help you keep calm and focused. It will help clarify your feelings and the main issues. Choose words that are not emotive or inflammatory but rather state factually the situation indicating how what happened made you feel (e.g. "When this happened, I felt..." rather than "It's your fault that..."). State clearly what you <i>perceive</i> the issue to be and your feelings about it. Think about what you want as an outcome. Ensure it is a constructive solution that is realistic and practical. For example, "I would like you to speak less loudly when you are on the telephone in the office" or "Could you lower the volume of the speaker on the phone".

Don't Blame	Open the conversation in a non-accusatory way – try not to put the other party on the defence by blaming them or accusing them. What you are aiming to do is to be heard and then to listen to their point of view and circumstances. If you name-call or raise your voice, this will make it more difficult for the other person to take on board what you are saying. Set the expectation early with the other person of where the discussion is heading by explaining you would like the opportunity to discuss your thoughts and feelings so the other party understands your viewpoint. Reassure them that when you are finished, you would like to listen carefully to their thoughts on the matter.
Don't Judge	Sometimes, things are not what they seem on the surface and there can be another explanation other than what you are interpreting as the facts of the matter. Each of us carry our own thoughts, feelings, interests and values into all of our relationships at work or outside of work. Understand that just as you have a unique perspective on things, so too does everyone else. The challenge is to accept the differences of others and work towards a resolution that meets everyone's needs. To resolve the dispute it is important firstly to state the specific issues calmly by summarising the situation in a factual, composed manner using "I" statements. You can learn more about I statements in the information contained below. Statements such as "I think it would be better if we do it this way", are less judgemental than "You're doing it the wrong way".
Allow them to Share	Be prepared to listen respectfully and openly without interrupting. Actively listen to all the information you are not aware of and be open-minded to find points you both have in common. Honour and respect the other person by not interrupting before they have had their say. It may open up new options to resolve the dispute and an opportunity to restore the relationship.
Listen	Even if you don't agree with what they are saying, respect their right to share their side of the story. It can be very frustrating trying to talk when the other party doesn't want to listen but talking about the problem will help clear the air, ease tensions between the parties and assist in reaching an agreement on how to resolve the conflict issues. It is preferable that rather than interrupting, you make notes to raise when they have finished talking. This will demonstrate you are really listening.

Clarify	If you are uncertain what the other party means, make a note to come back to that point. If you feel that you can ask a question without breaking the other person's thought processes, you may respectfully try clarifying the situation before they continue to a different topic. For example, "Excuse me (person's name) before you move on, to help me understand what you have just said, can you please be more specific about... or would you rather I raise that at the end?" or "Excuse me (person's name), but to make sure I understand you correctly, did you mean ... by that statement or are you going to cover that in a moment?" This not only ensures you are communicating correctly and have interpreted the issue as the other party intended, but also shows you are really listening and trying to understand what they have to say.
Work Cooperatively	There may need to be give and take on both sides, rather than one party telling the other they have to change. Make a concerted effort to find points you both agree on first. If necessary, start with the little issues and agree on these first before moving onto bigger ones. Finding common ground to build on will be a great step forward. If you make mocking or antagonistic statements or your body language suggests you are sceptical about what the other person is saying, the other person will stop listening and become angry. Sometimes you can keep a conflict from escalating by acknowledging there is a disagreement. If you say something like "well that's frustrating. I was hoping we could agree on that" gives everyone a chance to stop and think before continuing to argue. Forget about winning and losing. Work to find a resolution that lets both of you emerge as winners. If you stop trying to 'defeat' the other person, you will find you'll be more receptive to good ideas and resolve the conflict more quickly.
Address Everything	Rather than putting off more difficult issues or leaving out points that are harder to discuss, it is usually better to resolve the dispute once and for all. Not doing so will only cause the conflict to continue in the future. Get all the issues out in the open no matter how hard they are to talk about. It will be a relief to sort out a solution for both parties and allow the relationship to mend.

If you think some support about this process would be useful (remembering it is usual to feel anxious, worried or scared and support can help with this) you might wish to use Council's Employee Assistance Program service. For a confidential appointment at no cost to you, call Converge International on 1300 687 327.

Before the Conversation

Summarise the key event(s) and/or incident(s) you want to talk about	
For each event/incident, make a few detailed notes	
What effect has this situation had on you?	
What are some possible solutions – for you? (Try to list at least two possible solutions for each of the concerns you have listed.)	
What are some possible solutions – for the other person(s)? (Think about what might be possible solutions the other person(s) might put forward to resolve your concerns. Note whether you would be prepared to agree with each solution)	

What alternatives are there to resolution? (Think about what alternatives are available to you if you are unable to reach a resolution. What would it mean for you? What might it mean for the other party?)	
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Opening the Conversation

What will you say to start the conversation?	
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During the Conversation

Emotions, including tears, are a normal part of expressing how you feel. However, when you are upset, it can be difficult to tell the other person what is concerning you without it sounding like a criticism. This can result in the other person becoming defensive or angry. One way of removing blame or criticism from the discussion is to use an “I” statement.

How to make an “I” Statement

1. Say “I feel” (instead of “you (or they) make me feel”)
2. Say how you feel
3. Say what is the event/situation/behaviour that resulted in your feelings
4. Say what it is about the behaviour or its consequences that have made you feel uncomfortable / angry / disappointed etc.
5. Acknowledge any parts your behaviour that may have contributed to this conflict
6. Say what you would prefer to happen – an alternative to the behaviour

It then becomes a sentence, like -

*I feel annoyed when you **take the equipment I am using and you put it away before we have finished the job because it means I have to stop what I’m doing to get the equipment out again and this slows us down. I haven’t said anything before because** I know you’re only trying to help. **I would prefer** it though if we could leave the tidying up until we’re ready to leave. I’d like to understand it from your point of view though.*

Write "I" statements for each of the matters you wish to raise.	
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Prepare yourself to actively listen during your conversation.

- Take a deep breath and relax.
- Remove distractions as much as possible
- Use open body language (avoid crossing your arms, turning away from or pointing your finger at the person)
- Focus on listening as your first priority in the conversation. Hold any thoughts or responses you may have until the other person has finished speaking

When listening to the other person, the following responses can be helpful:

What to Do	How to Say It
Encourage the other person to share his or her issues as fully as possible	"I want to understand what has upset you." "I want to know what you are really hoping for."
Clarify the real issues, rather than making assumptions. Ask questions that allow you to gain this information, and which let the other person know you are trying to understand.	"Can you say more about that?" "Is that the way it usually happens?"
Restate what you have heard, so you are both able to see what has been understood so far - it may be that the other person will then realize that additional information is needed.	"It sounds like you weren't expecting that to happen."
Reflect feelings - be as clear as possible.	"I can imagine how upsetting that must have been."
Validate the concerns of the other person, even if a solution is elusive at this time. Expressing appreciation can be a very powerful message if it is conveyed with integrity and respect.	"I really appreciate that we are talking about this issue." "I am glad we are trying to figure this out."

After the Conversation

Show your appreciation. Express your gratitude for the time and effort the other person has invested in resolving the matters. You might say, “I really appreciate the time you spent reaching a compromise with me” or “Thanks for being willing to resolve our concerns earlier.”

Make some notes. You may like to make some notes of your conversation. These can be useful to remind yourself of what was agreed (and if appropriate you may choose to share these with the other person).

Have another ‘catch up’ at a later time. Schedule a short break away at a later time. Following a disagreement with a co-worker, the two of you can grab a cup of coffee or lunch. Don’t talk about the conflict; use this break to learn more about the other person.

Follow up if the matters are not resolved. Sometimes concerns can continue. If this happens, don’t ignore it. Seek to let the person know again the areas of concerns or seek further support to resolve.