



# THE GREAT DISCONNECT: CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

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Companies are adept in dealing with the pandemic, yet crucial conversations between managers and employees on pandemic-related challenges is the disconnect, according to Allianz research and its Manager and Employee Guides.

Consider this scenario: a manager lets an employee know that, given what's happening in the world, the Employee Assistance Program is available if they have any concerns. The employee starts to respond, 'thanks, I ...', when the manager cuts them off and says, 'I don't need to know anything'.

While the right intention from the company was there, the manager delivery was not genuine. The employee couldn't voice how they felt or what they needed — a lost crucial conversation to build trust, respect, mutual understanding, and engagement.

## WHAT IS A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION?

The Manager Guide describes a crucial conversation as 'a discussion with high stakes, differing opinions and strong emotions. When handled poorly or avoided, these conversations can lead to broader mental health issues in the workplace, including strained relationships, decreased productivity, employee dissatisfaction, poor results, or even more serious psychological issues'.

The research showed 79% of workers want to have conversations with their managers about workloads, career progression and work-life balance as COVID-19 disruptions continue to put pressure on workplaces and employees. Yet, 65% of employees won't talk with their managers first, and 24% are not satisfied how often their manager touches base with them about their mental health.

## BARRIERS TO CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS

There are four key barriers: employees and managers are disconnected, a proactive approach is required, the uneasiness of difficult conversations and a lack of training.

Employees and managers are disconnected as 90% of managers feel satisfied their organisation has facilitated a more mentally healthy work environment in the past 12 months, versus one in five employees who said they were very satisfied with their employer's ability to create mentally healthy workplaces.

In addition, 24% of managers proactively check in with their direct reports, and close to a third expect employees to bring forward their mental health issues.

Requesting a pay rise, a promotion, and reporting bullying and harassment incidents were the most uncomfortable topics for employees to raise with their manager. This year the research forecasts employee concerns will include flexible working arrangements, increased workload, stress and taking extended leave. 'These topics are going to surface, and they need to be prioritised', said Julie Mitchell, Chief General Manager Personal Injury at Allianz Australia. Psychological injury

claims have increased by 12% since the beginning of the pandemic, indicating the need for crucial conversations more than ever. Yet, 'the majority of employees have not had training on how to conduct these conversations', continued Ms Mitchell.

## HOW TO LEAD A CRUCIAL CONVERSATION

### Personalise the conversation

- Every crucial conversation is unique. Be clear on the key issues and establish the desired outcomes early to help guide the conversation.
- Make sure the conversation is in a safe environment for open dialogue such as outside the office, in a meeting room, a walking meeting or a video conference.

### Keep it open and trusting

- Approach the conversation with respect and care. If appropriate, offer employees a support person for the meeting to add to a sense of comfort.
- Ensure the next steps are clear at the end of the meeting.
- If the issue isn't resolved in one meeting, demonstrate you value your team member's opinion and support their concerns.

### Set the tone

- Approach the discussion with compassion and empathy through open and relaxed body language (direct eye contact, relaxed unfolded arms etc) and a friendly tone of voice which conveys a safe environment.
- Ask open questions to ensure you and your employee know that they've been seen, heard and the importance of the issue acknowledged.

### Drive progress

- A crucial conversation is an opportunity to build trust with an employee and make progress on the issue.
- The issue may have wider workplace impacts that need to be addressed balancing employee confidentiality.

### Play an active role in a positive healthy culture

- Schedule regular check-ins with team members, establish a workplace mental health taskforce, and encourage employees to switch off after hours to boost work-life balance.
- Ensure employees are familiar with the workplace mental health policy and understand how to escalate common issues. If one doesn't exist, advocate for one.
- Addressing workplace culture so people feel comfortable to raise issues in a safe environment is essential.

Ms Mitchell said that by championing transparent and empathetic conversations on mental health 'employees and employers can find sustainable balance throughout the pandemic and beyond'.