



## **An employer's guide to encouraging respectful conversations at work**

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## About this guide

The Labour Relations Agency seeks to improve employment relations in Northern Ireland and conversations are an important element of those relations.

The breadth of conversations considered appropriate for the workplace has expanded in recent years. Employees are no longer expected to separate work from their personal lives and many employers now recognise the business imperative of providing support to employees dealing with challenging life events such as parental bereavement, domestic abuse or menopause.

This guide has been produced to support employers who want to encourage respectful conversations at work, to eliminate taboos around certain topics or opinions, and to support an open and genuinely inclusive workplace culture in which all employees feel valued and have a genuine sense of belonging.

An employer who truly values diversity, equality and inclusion will set out the expectations of staff. This is important but is not always easy – people are all different and staff may hold opposing views on certain topics. Without parameters, however, employees may not understand the workplace rules relating to the how, where, when and why of workplace conversations. One employee may use ‘free speech’ as a justification to say anything, another will say nothing at all rather than risk backlash for expressing an unpopular or poorly articulated opinion.

## What makes a conversation respectful?

Though we might hope that all workplace conversations can be respectful, in this guide we focus on planned and deliberate conversations around potentially sensitive topics. These conversations provide a safe opportunity for dialogue and have respect at their core. Such respect impacts on all fundamental elements of the conversation.

### 1. Listening

Intentional listening is an essential element of effective communication. Mutual listening in a respectful conversation builds trust and promotes understanding. Listening requires more than identifying the appropriate pause in a conversation that allows us to advance our own argument. Proper listening supports empathy and bears witness to the other person’s unique experience.

### 2. Language

The words we use impact on others. Respectful language will not easily cause offence. Some words or terms are clearly abusive or derogatory and will obviously be inappropriate in the workplace. However, the language we use does not have to

cross the threshold of harassment or discrimination before it has the potential to be hurtful in its impact.

If we worry whether a word or term is inappropriate or know that the subject matter is sensitive for another person we can seek their advice on how to express ourselves appropriately. Equally, if we are uncomfortable with the language or words used by others in a conversation, we have the right to say so. Addressing issues of language reveals some vulnerability but it promotes better understanding.

Here are some examples to explain what we mean:

- “I would prefer it if you said I have a disability, rather than that I am disabled. My disability is only part of what makes me who I am.”
- “I know some of the expressions used around race are delicate and I don’t want to cause offence so please keep me right.”
- “Thank you for having this conversation with me about my son. Before we start, I want you to know that I’m very sensitive to the phrase ‘committed suicide’ because his death was not a crime. A better alternative for me is that he died by suicide.”
- “Language is important when discussing trans issues and I’m still learning, please tell me if any of the terms I’m using today are inappropriate.”

### 3. Tone

Tone is about how we talk to others, rather than the specific words we use. The meaning of our words can change, depending on the tone in which they are delivered. Something as simple as the greeting “Good morning John” can be said brightly, sarcastically, dismissively, wearily, or coolly; in such an instance the tone used communicates the intention of the greeting more precisely than the words.

The elements of tone in conversation can be relatively nuanced, so it is important for us to be aware of how clearly we convey our message, our speed of delivery, the extent to which our voice modulates, and its volume. It can be useful for us to reflect on our own tone, to ensure that a statement did not come across as dismissive, or inappropriately blunt.

Not all work conversations are verbal and the intended tone of communication can be particularly difficult to assess when written. In the workplace this can lead to conflict or misunderstanding. Business letters typically have a relatively formal style, but work emails tend to be less formal, and text messages or social media posts less formal again. Short messages in particular can be interpreted as abrupt or rude. Part of the reason for the popularity of emoji or informal abbreviations like ‘LOL’ when messaging others is that they help convey tone that might otherwise be ambiguous or open to misinterpretation.

Written communications around a sensitive conversation are also important, so when detailing arrangements prior to a conversation or confirming actions arising from the conversation, the tone of these communications must align with the tone of the conversation itself.

### **Checking understanding**

In a respectful conversation, particularly one in which sensitive issues are being discussed, it can be useful to pause periodically and check whether we have understood the other person correctly. This may be appropriate when we are unsure about a point that has been made and want to revisit it, or to summarise what we have heard so far and test our understanding.

We can do this by simply repeating the words used by the other person: “So if I hear you properly, you are saying.....”

### **Noticing our own bias**

We all have implicit biases and they help us function efficiently in a complex world. They also unconsciously inform beliefs and stereotyping, which can inhibit understanding and adversely impact decision-making. Implicit biases are often deeply held and challenging to eliminate, but we can reduce their influence on our thoughts and decisions by becoming aware of them. When we are conscious of how an implicit bias impacts on our perception of a person, whether positively or negatively, we become alert to the thinking shortcuts that lead us to the wrong conclusion about that person.

The modern workplace reflects a diverse society. If we only associate with like-minded individuals at work these interactions can enforce existing bias and we miss the opportunity for wider connections. A workplace equality, diversity or inclusion initiative can challenge our inherent bias through an aim of fostering the sense of belonging amongst all staff.

### **Acknowledging other perspectives**

Employees are all unique individuals with unique insights and unique life circumstances. Being able to appreciate another person’s perspective is simply being able to see the situation from their point of view. This skill helps enrich our own insight and encourages compassionate understanding. A respectful conversation at work will not always conclude with agreement, or compromise, or establishment of common ground, but it will end with each participant feeling validated for the

position they presented. It allows an employee to say they don't understand, to know they can ask for something to be explained, whilst maintaining a curious perspective.

Staff networks can provide valuable opportunities for employees to ask questions about topics they have no personal experience of, such as how mental ill health impacts on others' day to day lives.

## **Where do workplace conversations happen?**

Not all workplace conversations happen on an employer's premises. The concept of the 'workplace' has expanded in recent years, driven by technological advances and the explosion in remote working. The global experience of the Covid pandemic has left a legacy of blurred boundaries between work life and home life.

### **1. At home and in cyberspace**

Where work was once undertaken solely in the physical presence of colleagues, during pre-determined hours at a specific work location, it can now be completed remotely, often at home, at a flexible time, by an employee connecting virtually with colleagues using video, audio or messaging apps.

Informal work-related conversations have always had the potential to drift into personal topics, but they can now take place in colleagues' respective homes, with pets and housemates or family members in the background. It can be useful for employers to remind staff of the behaviours required of them when working, regardless of location, whether in-person, on the phone or across cyberspace.

Virtual group or team meetings often have a different dynamic to in-person meetings and an inclusive manager can adapt their approach, depending what is needed by their staff. Where some quieter employees may need to be encouraged to participate in online group discussions, others thrive without the power play of a board table arrangement.

### **2. On social media**

Social media has become an important communication tool for many businesses, and colleagues frequently connect through corporate social media and personal social media accounts. The impact of social platforms means that employees know more about each other's personal lives than would ever have been disclosed otherwise.

There would be limited merit in employer attempts to enforce nanny-like restrictions around such staff interactions; instead it is important to acknowledge that in this modern, hyper-connected world, the virtual conversations between colleagues, no matter how casual, can still be interpreted as workplace conversations.

Reasonable expectations around standards relating to respect, dignity, bullying and harassment have not changed, but the range of potential forums in which employees can be held accountable for their comments and behaviours has. Court decisions and the publicity around them have confirmed to employers and employees alike that thoughts published on social media are not private and freedom of expression is not an absolute right.

## **Bringing your 'whole self' to work**

Encouraging employees to bring their 'whole self' to work can inspire polarising responses from people. At its core, encouraging people to bring their whole selves or true selves to work allows them to show up completely, authentically and honestly – without the need for self-censorship or the protective cloak of a work persona.

On the face of it this is a virtuous pursuit, but it can only happen within an organisational culture that supports vulnerability, refrains from judgement, and has a high tolerance of difference. Encouraging employees to bring their whole selves to work requires an employer to welcome what may be perceived as the unpleasant, unlikeable aspects of its people too; not all workplaces are equipped to respond appropriately to the potential consequences. Employee trust will be irrevocably damaged if a "bring your whole self to work" directive is appended by "no, not those bits".

An employer's responsibility is at least to provide the potential for employees to be themselves at work, to welcome and appropriately support employees who commit to courageous authenticity. It is important then to lay the practical groundwork, creating an environment that provides psychological safety. This could take a variety of forms but can include EDI initiatives such as allyship working groups, diversity workshops or sessions on raising awareness. Knowing where to start with this type of work requires employers to understand first the existing workplace culture.

## **The importance of workplace culture**

Workplace culture shapes the environment in which respectful conversations can occur.

You will find it useful to reflect on your organisation's culture historically, its current state, and how you want it to evolve from this point. Engaging with employees is an essential component of change management in any organisation; tapping into the expertise of information and consultation frameworks will be useful, where they already exist.

It is important to do more than pay lip service to the creation of an inclusive workplace. If culture change is necessary, and it often will be, the methods of achieving it are well-established:

- Define your values and anchor them with examples of how they are demonstrated in employee behaviours
- Align your culture with your strategy and processes
- Make senior leadership commitment visible
- Communicate your intentions and encourage ongoing staff feedback
- Develop appropriate policies and procedures
- Provide appropriate training
- Measure your progress
- Celebrate your success

## Championing difference

EDI is short for equality, diversity and inclusion. Equality laws exist to protect people from discrimination at work and seek to achieve fairness and equal opportunities. There has been increasing focus on the concept of equity rather than equality and the similarity of these terms can cause confusion. Essentially, equity is about fairness – it can contribute to equality of outcome, by providing focus, or resource, or support allocated according to need. While equality is a useful goal, it is rarely achieved without equity. Diversity is about placing value on and having respect for people's differences. Inclusion means that everyone feels valued and has a sense of belonging at work.

Encouraging respectful conversations at work through an EDI lens provides space for everyone to have a voice, allows for those voices to be varied, anticipates some voices to be dissenting and allows for voices expressing minority opinions.

## Planning for imperfection

Not all workplace conversations will be respectful and you will need to plan for times when conversations go badly. As an employer you have a duty of care to protect the health, safety and welfare of your employees and this includes protection from discrimination, bullying and harassment.

In practical terms, your existing policies and procedures have already established the boundaries of appropriate employee behaviour, though you may want to review them to ensure they reflect current best practice and are representative of modern society. If you would find it useful to be more explicit about the behaviours you want to encourage, a general Code of Conduct, or meetings protocol will leave people in no

doubt. If your equality policies do not currently specify the protected characteristics of employees through anti-discrimination legislation, or would benefit from the addition of broader EDI considerations, it may be appropriate to update them.

You can support your employees by providing training on behavioural governance, how to start a conversation, how to challenge behaviours, manage emotions, recognise personal triggers and apologise when warranted.

You cannot be an expert in all areas but you can become informed enough to be able to signpost employees to further advice and support.

Depending on your existing culture, some employees may be willing to assume ambassadorial roles to champion specific causes, whether that is through an LGBT+ network, dignity at work council, or menopause group. Such initiatives can help start conversations about topics in which your organisation is currently silent and help employees become more courageous about speaking their truth at work. The most powerful advocates of an initiative are the employees who can share their lived experience. These employees can share their unique stories to help raise awareness on the barriers to connection that they have encountered. Such stories can encourage connection and solidarity amongst colleagues.

## Encouraging respectful conversations - where to start?

We have compiled a list of practical actions employers can take in order to encourage respectful conversations in the workplace. These are suggestions and you can decide which actions are appropriate to your organisation at this point in time. If you find the list overwhelming, choose just one action to help get you started:

- ✓ Be honest about your current culture and choose one aspect you want to develop
- ✓ The visible commitment of leaders helps set an example across the organisation
- ✓ Check whether your existing policies and practices align with inclusion
- ✓ Establish protocols that support respectful conversations
- ✓ Provide early guidance to key people, such as HR or line managers. It is important that they respond appropriately to an initial approach from staff
- ✓ Offer training in unconscious bias and psychological safety at work
- ✓ Data from staff surveys can help you decide what to start working on first and monitor progress over time
- ✓ Provide awareness raising and information sessions for staff
- ✓ Develop line management capability through education and training
- ✓ It can be useful to get people to sign up to a behavioural pledge
- ✓ Launch an EDI initiative that celebrates diversity
- ✓ Encourage all staff to engage in organisational initiatives
- ✓ Consider potential for staff networks supported by allies



- ✓ Use your in-house experts – their lived experience can provide invaluable knowledge and perspective
- ✓ Some staff will be nervous about starting a respectful conversation – provide training in challenging conversations and link them to a contact person for support
- ✓ Various guides exist about the appropriate use of language and glossaries of terms – signpost your employees to them or create your own
- ✓ Don't pretend to know everything – also signpost employees to external sources of information and support