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# How to navigate crucial conversations: A guide for employees

Empowering Australian employees to feel comfortable handling crucial conversations in the modern workplace.



# How Australian employees feel about crucial conversations

## **Crucial conversations are vital to creating more mentally healthy workplaces.**

Despite workplaces becoming better at adapting to the challenges presented by the pandemic, external and internal factors continue to put pressure on workplace issues. From unsustainable workloads, challenges around career progression and extended working from home arrangements, employees and managers have much to discuss as they work to support mental health in the modern workplace.

A crucial conversation is 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, or extended periods of leave.<sup>1</sup>

Research commissioned by Allianz has revealed that almost 1-in-2 employees feel uncomfortable having conversations about their concerns in the workplace with their managers.<sup>2</sup> Coincidentally, many managers feel ill-equipped to deal with such interactions.

Allianz data shows that mental health (psychological) injury claims have increased 12% since the pandemic began.<sup>3</sup> This means that knowing how to approach a crucial conversation that encourages higher personal wellbeing is now more important than ever.

*“While many businesses have adapted to new ways of working since the pandemic began, a third year of disruption and increased workload requires a re-think. Ensuring employees and their managers are engaging with one another regularly to have productive conversations is vital to building more mentally healthy workplaces in 2022.”*

– Julie Mitchell,  
Chief General Manager Personal Injury  
at Allianz Australia

# A snapshot of crucial conversations in the modern workplace

While discussions about mental health have become more commonplace, Allianz's research<sup>2</sup> reveals there is disconnect between employees and managers that is standing in the way of crucial conversations in the workplace.



## Employees and managers don't connect often enough

A quarter of employees only speak to their manager once a month, while over a third of employees haven't had a crucial conversation with their employer at all in the past 12 months.<sup>2</sup>



## Employees avoid uncomfortable topics

Crucial conversations are too often put to the side. Workers ranked discussing a pay rise (29%), bullying and harassment (16%) and requesting a promotion (16%) as the most uncomfortable topics to raise with their manager – even more so than discussing resignation (11%).<sup>2</sup>



## Employees seek support away from their manager

65% of employees report they would not turn to their manager first when preparing to have a conversation about an issue at work, stating they are unsure who to speak to, or would turn to someone else like a peer within their organisation or someone outside the workplace.<sup>2</sup>



## Employees are unsure what to say

Approaching a difficult conversation is like walking in the dark for most Australian employees. Just 4% of employees state they have an inclusive work culture that fosters open conversations. A workplace fostering open conversation would offer training and guidance, mentorship programs and private spaces that relate to and facilitate crucial conversations. Furthermore, only 1-in-5 employees state they have had training on how to conduct crucial conversations.<sup>2</sup>

# 5 tips to help you navigate a crucial conversation with your manager

Knowing the right way to approach a crucial conversation can make all the difference to your workplace mental health. As an employee, you can play an active role in enabling crucial discussions with your manager, and help direct these discussions towards positive outcomes.



## **Be prepared to have a constructive discussion**

As an employee, it's important to voice your feelings and concerns to create opportunities for improvement. To feel confident about your upcoming discussion, prepare yourself before requesting a meeting with your manager:

- ✓ Gather your thoughts and write them down
- ✓ Speak with a peer or mentor you trust and settle your mindset
- ✓ Make sure you're able to address key issues with a clear, solutions-based approach

Think of it as an opportunity to have a constructive conversation as opposed to a difficult discussion. Remember that it's OK to ask to invite a support person to join the meeting to help you feel comfortable.



## It's OK to be nervous

For many employees, engaging in a crucial conversation with their manager can bring a sense of stress or anxiety. This is a completely normal reaction, and you can adopt some simple steps that might help you effectively engage with your manager and secure a better outcome.

Some ways you can navigate nervousness and have a productive discussion with your manager include:

- ✓ Asking open questions
- ✓ Using 'I feel' statements
- ✓ Giving non-verbal cues, such as direct eye contact
- ✓ Using open body language, such as keeping your arms uncrossed

If you begin to feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable during the discussion, remember it's OK to ask for a break or to reschedule the discussion to a later date.



## Share your expectations clearly

Almost a third of managers expect employees to approach them about mental health in the workplace.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, making your point of view clear to your manager early during the discussion is important. Ultimately, your goal is to create more openness and transparency between you and your manager. Being clear in your expectations will likely lead to a stronger alignment on outcomes and a more mentally healthy work environment.



## Bring an open mind

There's a chance your manager's viewpoint could differ from your own, so it's important to be open to negotiating a solution you both agree on. If you're comfortable, you may like to proactively offer solutions that you're willing to workshop with your manager. If sharing your concerns regarding your mental health at work, be sure to have reasonable expectations your organisation can meet to achieve a more sustainable work-life balance.



## Confirm your next crucial conversation

Follow up a crucial conversation in writing, with a note that shows you and your manager are aligned on the discussion and next step or solution that's been reached. It's helpful to set a timeline for you and your manager to reconnect about your conversation, so progress towards a solution can continue.

If you don't feel the conversation went as planned, take a moment to reflect and then plan the next course of action. This could mean organising another time, or speaking with a mentor, business leader or member of HR.

**Crucial conversations are made possible when both employees and managers are proactive, voicing their needs in considered ways. As an employee, feeling prepared to share your point of view and being solution-focused will help make a crucial conversation more effective, enabling growth and support for your mental health in the workplace.**



*“At Allianz, we’re committed to supporting the creation of mentally healthy workplaces. We believe in championing transparent and empathetic dialogue so employees are comfortable to have the crucial conversations needed to navigate Australia’s ever-changing employment landscape.”*

– Julie Mitchell, Chief General Manager Personal Injury at Allianz Australia

**For more information, visit our [Workplace Mental Health hub](#).**

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of ‘crucial conversations’ is sourced from ‘Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High’ (Patterson et al., 2012) and was further developed in conjunction with active clinical mental health professionals

<sup>2</sup> The research was commissioned by Allianz and conducted by YouGov Plc. The survey was conducted online with a nationally representative sample of 834 Australian employees (middle managers and below designations) and a nationally representative sample of 259 Australian senior managers (senior managers and above designations) and was carried out between 7 and 12 December 2021. All data was post-weighted by age, gender and region to reflect the latest population estimates

<sup>3</sup> Allianz Workers Compensation claims data comparing primary psychological active claims to December 2021 from December 2019, from the Allianz Australia Workers’ Compensation Underwritten Portfolio