

Five steps build leaders' "conversation competence"

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One of the most common challenges leaders face is how to approach someone they are concerned about at work, and there are five steps to building "conversation competence", according to a specialist in the field.

The Blueberry Institute MD **Fleur Heazlewood** has devised a 'mental health mastery framework', which she outlines in her new book, [Leading Wellbeing: A leader's guide to mental health conversations at work](#).

The framework comprises five steps:

- **prepare** by planning what to say before meeting;
- **ask** a considered question to start the conversation;
- **listen** to show empathy and understanding;
- **empower** by [encouraging action without taking responsibility](#); and
- balance care with **performance** conversations.



Fleur Heazlewood, The Blueberry Institute

It's important to prepare, even before concern for a particular person or people arises, Heazlewood says. Leaders can do this by inviting members of their team to share one thing that has gone well for them, and one thing they need help with, during weekly meetings; this helps to build trust and vulnerability.

They can also build connection and empathy by starting their one-on-one meetings by "checking in on *how* someone is doing before moving onto *what* someone is doing".

"An important part of providing psychological safety is demonstrating that you want to know how people are, that they are a valued member of your team, and that if something is troubling them you are there to listen and help," Heazlewood says.

She encourages leaders to schedule regular individual check-ins to discuss workload, progress and any wellbeing issues. Particularly if they're concerned the person is facing mental health challenges, if they plan to ask about this they should schedule extra time, just in case.

"If a colleague at work gives you the privilege of their trust in sharing with you what is really going on for them and that they are struggling, you don't want to shut them down because you only have 15 minutes before your next meeting," Heazlewood says. Her rule of thumb is to schedule an hour, even if only a quarter of the time ends up being needed.

Preparing for a mental health check-in

If a leader has reason to think one of their employees might need mental health support, and is raising concern for the first time, Heazlewood suggests taking some time to prepare in advance for the conversation.

Leaders can use this time to list the signs and changes they've noticed, and plan their opening questions. They might also consider the best location to meet and how to frame the invitation, familiarise themselves with support options, and relevant policies and procedures.

Heazlewood recommends beginning the conversation by asking a "a neutral, open-ended question that clearly shows the conversation is not about how they are going at work but how they are as a person" before moving on to a direct check-in question.

"Share what you have observed and how it differs to how they would usually show up. This shows you have noticed and care," she says, noting that while "I" statements can project care and increase connection, "you" and "we" statements can feel like an attack.

"I have noticed you are looking tired' projects empathy," she explains.

"'You are looking tired' can feel like an accusation or invoke a need to defend. 'We have noticed you are looking tired' can provoke concern or worry. Who is we? What are people saying about me? Who is talking about me behind my back?"

The leader should be clear that the conversation is confidential, informal, and not a performance discussion. Even if the person's performance has been suffering, that should be a separate conversation.

"Plan for a care conversation, and then, when care support is in place, talk about performance support," Heazlewood says.

Keeping the two separate doesn't mean ignoring the "elephant in the room", she notes. If performance is an issue, the leader should let the person know a discussion about supporting their performance might take place further down the track, taking care to frame it in a positive way, such as, "we will work together to support your performance", she says.

Would you like to provide further insights or commentary on this news? The HR Daily team [wants to hear from you](#).

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