

**When you need to raise a difficult issue with somebody are you concerned that your approach will be ineffective? Maybe you will be such a peacemaker that the issue won't be addressed. Or perhaps you're so determined in your approach that you spark off an argument. The middle ground is to use a positive assertive approach.**

It can be a challenge to initiate a difficult conversation. There is no magic phrase that guarantees success but there are a range of strategies that can create a positive and respectful environment for the discussion. **Positive assertiveness** is the ability to honestly express your opinions and feelings in a way that is respectful of others. It involves:

- + Being clear
- + Taking ownership of your viewpoint
- + Respect for difference
- + Willingness to listen
- + Influence through discussion and negotiation

### **Avoid a "Harsh Start up" – Start Gently**

If you are frustrated about a situation there is a risk that your words and body language will be harsh. Make sure you are not highly emotional. It is crucial not to start with strong words, personal attacks or criticism.

- ✗ "You just don't care do you? You're always late."
- ✓ "I rely on people to be on time. I find it frustrating to have to wait so long."

### **Consider "Setting the Scene"**

For an important discussion it is helpful to set the scene. This helps the other person to understand your positive intention.

- ☞ "I appreciate you making time to talk. I don't always find these discussions easy but I know it'll help to go through this."

### **Choose the right time & place**

Ideally give the feedback close to the event and in an appropriate time and place – preferably in private. Avoid raising sensitive issues when you or the other person is stressed.

### **Be specific – refer to actual examples**

If you want to a helpful discussion it is important to use specific language and actual examples.

Avoid generalisations (e.g. "all," "never," "everything") – we tend to use this type of language when we are frustrated but it only makes others feel unfairly criticised.

Avoid vague words (e.g. "it", "that", "possible") – we tend to be vague when we are worried about hurting a person's feelings or if we are not confident to challenge the person.

### **Offer feedback on what you observe – no jumping to conclusions**

Make factual observations rather than your interpretations.

- ✓ "We have had no response to our letters even after a reminder..."
- ✗ "You obviously don't care."

### **Refer to how you feel, rather than making judgments/ blaming**

Speak about your own feelings. You can discuss how you feel about a situation without blaming. By speaking about your experience the other person has a chance to respond without feeling attacked.

- ✓ "I'm frustrated that no records have been kept - it makes my job very difficult".
- ✗ "Your slackness is making my life hell."

### **Comment on positives**

People value recognition and are more likely to respond well if they don't just hear critical comments.

### **Listen to their view – acknowledge and summarise**

Listen carefully, avoiding interruptions. Where necessary seek clarification to achieve a better understanding. Acknowledge their point of view and summarise their response. This acknowledgment shows you understand them and is important to do prior to telling them that you disagree with their viewpoint.