

Enabling authentic conversations with your working caregivers

It's great to support your employees in their joyous moments, moments when they're expanding their families, or celebrating a milestone... but what about the perceived difficult conversations? When someone's personal difficulties are affecting their work? By allowing employees to be authentic and bring their whole selves to work, we pave the way for a more open and inclusive culture of equal opportunity.

Every day at Circle In, we speak with customers who want to go beyond policy and legislation to give their working caregivers a more supportive workplace. All employees are different and the distribution of caring activities will vary from person to person, family to family. When it comes to commitments and needs outside work, some have limited options beyond themselves and others have large formal and informal support structures. It's important for employees to feel like they can share their wins and challenges at work because it is very much a part of what makes or breaks their workday.

This is the invisible work that leaders may not see, and it's important not to project our own experiences and/or expectations on employees. Having a supportive leader leads to improved productivity and engagement.

There is lots of support and understanding around what it means to be a working parent, so there's no fear to ask for time off or to leave early, say for a school concert, etc. I believe there's an understanding that if you give parents flexibility and support, you'll get that paid back in spades. - Cotton On Group Employee

1. Make it about them, not you

The best conversations begin by focusing on the other person. We can encourage productive communication by showing genuine interest in their world and their interests and by asking open-ended questions that enable them to tell us how they think or feel about a specific topic.

If this is not your first conversation with them, ask follow-up questions about topics they've discussed in previous conversations. Remember, the most positive workplaces are those whose team members feel heard, valued, and supported, so that's your goal when you invite your employee to chat.

2. Listen to understand (i.e. practice active listening)

The biggest mistake we make in conversation is planning how we'll respond while someone else is still speaking. Become aware of this during your conversations. When you find your mind going to a response, stop and listen. This may not be easy, especially if you are highly extroverted by nature.

One way to practice this skill is by spending time with your partner or a friend and repeating back to them what they've just said. This exercise helps create awareness of the amount of time we spend actively listening.

3. Support caregivers juggling unexpected moments and show them it's safe to ask for help:

"I understand that your child hasn't been sleeping lately and this is taking a toll on you. See how you go over the next few days and don't hesitate to give me a quick phone call in the morning to work through a plan of action."

Setting and managing expectations upfront and showing your people that you expect the occasional setback demonstrates that you care and are ready to support them.

4. Having healthy conversations about what's okay and what's not okay:

"It's totally okay that you had to prioritize your family yesterday. I understand that family comes first. It's not okay when you say you've got things covered and avoid reprioritizing tasks because we end up missing client deadlines."

Avoiding conversations altogether or dismissing conversations by implying that they don't have a place in the workplace can lead to bigger problems. Setting boundaries helps you both.

5. Recognize your bias

It's important to check in on the underlying assumptions that form your views of the topic at hand. Do you find yourself judging the validity of the request rather than focusing on what impact it will have on outcomes? Have an open mind and use the tips above to keep you focused on what's possible, recognizing how you might have to lead differently to make this work for your team.