

# Is Your Talking Style Mental Health Friendly? 3 Tips to Improve Your Conversations at Work

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Do you know a professional with a superhuman ability to welcome criticism? Of course not, yet for over a century employees have been expected to leave their emotions at home and assume a Teflon-like ability to handle anything that's said to them. Cognitive science has discredited this crazy notion by proving we can't choose to be unemotional any more than we can choose to live without breathing. It's no surprise an increasing number of workplace health and safety laws are including the protection of psychological safety, to safeguard employees from a broad range of actions and comments that are no longer acceptable. So, what can a leader do to be mental health friendly? What should they expect from a conversation at work? How can they speak with clarity and kindness?

Below are three tips to improve the mental health of your work conversations:

## 1. Think of conversation as a verbal report card

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According to Paul Zak, author of *The Moral Molecule: How Trust Works*, we are what zoologists call an "obligatorily gregarious species." We thrive well in groups and don't do well physically or emotionally for long periods of time alone. The same goes for employees who are left in the dark wondering how to proceed on a project or waiting to have a performance review rescheduled. The human brain needs to know if it's safe to proceed. It can become mentally taxing for an employee to continually work without knowing where they stand. Seemingly innocent behaviours such as rushing through a discussion, failing to remember important details or checking your phone while someone else is talking, can send the wrong message. Zak says conversation has the effect of a verbal massage. It releases oxytocin and builds social trust.

Translation: A conversation is more than just an exchange of words; it's a litmus test on how much you value the person you are talking to whether it's your employee or colleague.

## 2. Create a culture of asking for feedback

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Do you remember the old adage "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all?" This may be good advice in your personal life, but it doesn't help when you're at work. Feedback fuels performance. We may not want to admit it, but the human brain craves the reassurance feedback can offer. Similarly, a lack of response to one's work can leave employees feeling demoralized. The problem is too many leaders are shy to give

constructive criticism. And, to be fair, many employees are unprepared to hear opinions that don't mirror their own. Psychologists have determined unsolicited feedback is heard as a criticism:

*“Evaluation, when it is not asked for, and when it has consequences as it does in school, is [perceived by the mind as] a threat.”*

The NeuroLeadership Institute offered a similar conclusion at their summit, via results of their in-depth research study on feedback that works. They found employees welcomed feedback if they were the ones to request it. What can leaders do to capitalize on this insight? Embed soliciting others for feedback into your work culture. Reposition criticism as a data point. The Institute recommends organizations to seek specific feedback such as “what to do more of” and “what to rethink”.

Translation: Only 34 percent of companies believe that their employees actively provide feedback to the organization and leaders. Be a part of the new engagement conversation by collecting feedback on a frequent basis, and taking action on that feedback. Ask the right questions and be available for employees when they're ready to give and receive feedback.

### 3. Reframe giving a “thank you” as offering validation

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It's well known that frequent employee recognition is a wonderful way to promote mental health. The human mind is wired to need the neurochemical release that comes from receiving a compliment from someone else. This spontaneous reaction is stimulated by the brain. Even if you know you hit a homerun at work, you can't think yourself into feeling the artificial high that comes from receiving recognition from a colleague or your leader. What happens after a person receives positive reaffirmation for their work performance? They want to earn another one, and another one, and so on. Hearing “thank you” is wonderful, but the bigger takeaway employees get from being recognized is validation that they belong. Team members who experience extended periods of time without being recognized for their contribution to the team can have doubts of insecurity. Leaders can misinterpret their employees' behaviour as a heightened need for recognition when what they really seek is reassurance. It's far more effective to give frequent and personalized recognition, whether it's in the form of a monetary or social recognition.

Translation: Spread employee recognition across your organization on a regular basis. Employees crave recognition and currently only 11 percent receive recognition weekly. Encourage both peer-to-peer and manager-to-employee recognitions.

Small conversation tweaks like the ones listed above can go a long way to help boost the mental wellness of your staff and colleagues. Workplace health and safety laws are in the early days of addressing psychological safety. It's likely even more expectations on how to

communicate effectively will be placed on leaders in the future. Investing in new mental health friendly conversation habits will be time well spent.

To learn more about how to improve your conversations at work, download Achievers' white paper, "[Empowerment and Trust: The Keys to Employee Engagement.](#)"