

# Dealing with Vaccine Hesitancy: A Supervisor's Role

## Introduction

If you're a supervisor who needs to gather information about employees' vaccination status, or you're engaging with an employee who is unwilling to get vaccinated and wants accommodation, how you manage your own reaction and how you communicate will be critical. The following simple, concrete tips can help.

## Top Tips for Having Conversations About the Vaccination Policy

### 1. Prepare for the Conversation

Managing your own mindset is key to handling difficult conversations. You can prepare by applying the following best practices.

- Set a Goal: Frame a positive goal for the conversation. This could be:
  - My role is not to persuade the employee to get vaccinated or to defend the policy, but rather to provide helpful information around the policy, the choices available and potential outcomes of those choices.
  - I will share the information needed; the employee will walk away with an understanding of their options and will think carefully over their decision.
- Manage your emotions: stay calm and avoid getting drawn into the other person's emotion. Avoid escalation where you may later regret something you say.
  - Think about self-management techniques that work for you and will help you feel less anxious or worried.
  - Some techniques could be:
    - Tell yourself encouraging statements (such as, I am a good supervisor, I want to be helpful, we can get through this).
    - Focus on your breathing.
    - Suggest a break or offer to revisit the conversation later.
    - Debrief with a colleague or supervisor.
- Tone: your tone conveys how you feel to the other person.

- Think about how to start the conversation off positively so that the person knows you genuinely care about their well-being.
- Check yourself for defensive thinking and openness to the conversation. Ask yourself:
  - What are their good intentions? Remain open and curious about their point of view as they make statements or ask questions. Staying open encourages the same back from the employee.
  - What assumptions are you making about the other person? Are you assuming you already know what they're thinking?
- Consider the employee's perspective.
  - Remember there are many different reasons that people may have for vaccine hesitancy. Those reasons are important to them and may be connected to historical discrimination.
- Leave enough time for these conversations and for the person to think about it afterward.

## APPROACHING THE CONVERSATION

### 2. Connect with the person

As a leader, the relationship you have with your employees is critical, especially now. How you engage in the discussion is as important as the outcome. Engaging with people who are upset, stressed, and resistant requires you to be as relaxed and respectful as possible. You want them to see you as someone who wants to help solve their problem. Your relationship with them is the platform to achieve that. When people are upset or afraid, human connection is what they want, and it can help them stay calm.

#### *Things we can do:*

- Even before these important conversations happen, ensure you have spent some time connecting with people 1:1 and hearing what is going on for them. Even 5-10 minutes can make a connection. Start now.
- At the beginning of any discussion about the vaccination policy, it is important to start positively and build rapport.
- Throughout the conversation, show a genuine care and concern for them as a person.

- Use a calm, confident tone of voice, especially when emotions arise. This *is critical* because it calms an upset person, allowing them to listen to what you have to say.
- Emphasize you want to work together to help them with their decision or any problems they see.
- Actively listen, ask open questions and paraphrase what you hear.
- Show respect for their worries or fears, even if their concerns don't make sense to you. This doesn't mean you need to agree with them. In fact, agreeing with them may only further inflame their sense of injustice or anger. You also don't have to listen forever. It is okay to redirect, provided we come from a caring place.
- Remember your role is not to argue or defend the policy. It is to let them know what their options are if they choose to disregard the policy. Trying to persuade or convince them may inadvertently cause them to become more inflexible and rigid in their thinking. Instead, stick to the facts and focus on staying connected with them.

***Things we can say:***

- *"I appreciate .... is very important to you and I see how difficult it is. I will listen to your concerns and I will do my best to help you."*
- *"I see you hope to ..."*
- *"I am sorry this is so difficult."*
- *"Let's see if we can solve this together."*
- *"I'd like to help you if I can."*

### **3. Focus on being a helpful source of information**

As a supervisor your role is to provide information about the policy. It is not your role to persuade the employee to get vaccinated. We can't control whether the person gets vaccinated or complies with the policy, only the employee can decide to do that. It may be tempting to try to persuade an employee about the importance of getting vaccinated and the risks to them of not following policy. In fact, persuading, lecturing, or shaming may only push the person into becoming further entrenched and will likely have a negative impact on your long-term relationship. It is critical that the focus is on staying connected while being a helpful source of information to assist them in making choices and thinking through the potential consequences.

***Things we can do:***

- Remind yourself, it is not your responsibility to convince anyone to get vaccinated.
- Stay calm and confident and provide information that helps them make a well thought out decision.
- Focus on the information at hand, you are essentially saying: “You and I are good; I have your best interests in mind; the rules say these are the different choices you have.”
- Focus on things external to your relationship with the person, like rules, policies and guidelines. This way you avoid getting into a personality conflict or them seeing you as the obstacle.
- When dealing with resistance with a direction or policy, it’s helpful to show respect for their worries and fears and then give them information/education.

### **Things we can say:**

- *“I respect this is stressful for you. The procedures and guidelines we have put in place address...”*
- *“I want to work with you on this. As your supervisor, my role is to make sure you have the information about the policy and how it might affect you.”*
- *“You may not realize it, but our policies do not allow us to do your request. I understand your frustration with that. I wish I could help you more.”*
- *“The new policy requires us to do it this way...”*
- *“The rules say that I can’t do (what you are asking) for anyone. It could put my job in jeopardy.”*
- Emphasize you want to problem-solve together as much as possible, and that you have information that can help them with their decision. You could say things like:
  - “I can’t do that, but here’s what I can do. I can get you more information”
  - “You don’t have to decide right now. You can think about it.”

### **Things to Avoid:**

- Avoid direct personal confrontation, which may just turn into a power struggle.
- Avoid saying things like “You’re wrong ...” or “You are overreacting...” “I am not doing that...” or “I have decided not to support to your request...” The person may just see you as the person they should be angry with.

## **4. Focus on Choices**

For some people, mandated policy that requires we get vaccinated can seem like a violation of one’s autonomy. Autonomy is about feeling in control and having a choice. When we feel our autonomy is being violated, we can react with emotions that surprise even ourselves. As a leader, find ways to offer the person a little autonomy wherever you

can. By framing choices, you will shift the conversation to problem-solving, away from emotions. You will give them a sense of autonomy and make them responsible for what happens next.

***What we can do:***

- Frame things in terms of the choices or options in front of them. Even in small things or side issues like giving them time to decide, or when to meet, can help.
- When talking about potential consequences, it is important to come from a respectful and educational place. Coming from a caring place about the potential consequences of different choices will help them with their decision. Otherwise, the consequences may be seen as a threat, which will only push them further into defensive or extreme thinking.
- Be matter of fact, using the same calm, confident tone of voice (don't sugar coat). You will come across as authentic and real, someone to whom they should pay attention.
- Offer a follow up conversation if there is time, as their thinking will likely evolve.

***Things we can say:***

- *"I understand this is frustrating and I want to make sure you have the information and understand and the options that are in front of you."*
- *"Let's see if we can think of a couple of options – I see A or B. What do you think?"*
- *"What if we focus on what you need and then brainstorm, within the parameters we have, a few options for meeting those needs?"*

***Things to avoid:***

- Avoid working too hard by coming up with all the ideas – you want to engage the person in problem-solving which can shift them out of their emotional or defensive thinking. Instead, ask them for their ideas.
- Avoid spending time resolving the person's emotions, especially when there is strong emotion or anger about the situation. When we focus too much on feelings, we may be asking more of ourselves than we are able to give, and we may inadvertently contribute to the person becoming more upset. Instead, we want to acknowledge their frustrations then calmly shift the upset person to focus on problem-solving, away from their emotions.

## Closing

Preparing to bring a calm leadership presence and having a clear understanding of the information available will be most helpful. With that calm and genuine approach, you will be able to connect with your employee, focusing on offering information and discussing options together.

- **If are experiencing or expecting significant challenging behaviour in these conversations and would like more information and support, contact the Conflict Management Office through [AskMyHR](#) service request**
- Call AskMyHR at [250 952-6000](tel:2509526000) or [1 877 277-0772](tel:18772770772) (toll free)

**If you would like training on managing conflict effectively**, enroll in the 2-day course called Conflict Management for Leaders. It is a virtual, interactive course that is accessible for all supervisors and managers across the province. You can register through the [Learning System](#).

*Need more help?*

[Conflict Management Services](#)

**Conflict Management Office | BC Public Service Agency**

For more information, please see:

[From Conflict to Calm – Skills for Dealing with Strong Emotion \(Video\)](#)

Some of the resources that were drawn on for this article:

1. Eddy, William LCSW, Esq. BIFF: Quick Responses to High Conflict People, Their Personal Attacks, Hostile Email and Social Media Meltdowns, Unhooked Books, 2014.
2. Schore, Allan The Development of the Unconscious Mind, W.W.Norton & Company, 2019
3. LeBaron, Michelle Bridging Troubled Waters, Jossey-Bass, 2002.
4. Article - Motivational Interviewing (MI) - Rolling with Resistance, University of Missouri, 2015.
5. Fredrike Bannink, Handbook of Solution-Focused Conflict Management, Hogrefe Publishing, 2010.