



Empathy-first conversations during change

A mini guide for line managers



When change happens, emotions often show up before solutions. This guide helps you lead conversations with empathy, clarity and confidence - even when you don't have all the answers.

Why empathy matters during change

Change often brings uncertainty, loss of control and fear of the unknown.

As a line manager, how you **listen and respond** can either increase anxiety - or reduce it.



Remember: You don't need to fix everything. Often, being heard is what helps people move forward.

Before the conversation: prepare your mindset

Best practice

- Go in curious, not defensive.
- Expect emotion - and allow space for it.
- Remind yourself: this isn't personal, it's human.

Quick check

- Am I ready to listen without interrupting?
- Can I sit with uncertainty if I don't have an answer?

Opening the conversation with empathy

Start by inviting openness, not agreement.

Try these opening prompts



"How are you feeling about the changes right now?"



"What's been on your mind since we shared the update?"



"What feels most uncertain for you at the moment?"



Tip: Ask one question - then pause. Silence often gives people permission to speak honestly.

Understanding what's really behind the concern

People rarely lead with the real issue. Your role is to gently uncover it.

Use these prompts

... "Can you tell me a bit more about what's worrying you?"

... "What impact do you feel this change might have on you?"

... "What part of this feels hardest right now?"

Best practice

- Listen to tone and body language, not just words.
- Avoid jumping in with reassurance too early.

Validating feelings (without agreeing or fixing)

Validation isn't agreement - it's acknowledgement.

Helpful phrases

... "That makes sense given the uncertainty."

... "I can see why that feels frustrating."

... "It's completely normal to feel unsettled by this."

Avoid

🚫 "Don't worry, it'll be fine."

🚫 "At least it's not as bad as..."

🚫 "There's no reason to feel like that."

Offering support, not solutions

Once someone feels heard, they're more open to next steps.

Support-focused questions

... "What support would help you most right now?"

... "Is there anything we could adjust to make this transition easier?"

... "Would it help to check in again next week?"

Best practice

- Agree one small, practical next step.
- Keep support realistic and within your control.

Bringing the conversation back to stability

Change conversations shouldn't end in uncertainty.

Helpful closing prompts

... "Let's focus on what we can control this week."

... "Here's what stays the same for now."

... "I'll update you as soon as I know more."



Tip: End with clarity on:

- What happens next
- When you'll reconnect

After the conversation: follow through

Empathy builds trust - consistency keeps it.

Good practice

- Follow up on anything you said you'd do.
- Share updates, even if nothing has changed.
- Keep regular check-ins going.

Manager reminder

Your behaviour sets the tone. Calm, consistent leadership helps people feel grounded - even when change is ongoing.

One-minute empathy reset (keep this handy)

Before or during a tough conversation, ask yourself:

- ✓ Am I listening to understand, not reply?
- ✓ Have I acknowledged how this feels?
- ✓ Have I offered support or clarity, not just information?

That's empathy in action.

Turn empathetic conversations into ongoing support with Breathe.

Record 1:1s, track actions, and keep check-ins consistent - even as change continues.



[Performance management with Breathe](#)