Six effective ways to have that difficult conversation at work

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Abstract
Employees want more feedback. Gen Y employees in particular, want constant feedback. Managers however are often reluctant to give feedback if they fear that what starts as a rational conversation may degenerate into an emotional one. Even managers trained in coaching have admitted to being reluctant to tackle employees seen as abrasive or aggressive.

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Some simple guidelines can help managers to achieve positive outcomes from difficult conversations:

1. Stick to the facts

State what you believe to be the facts, without any interpretation. For example, instead of suggesting that an employee isn’t motivated, outline the actions or lack of action which lead you to believe this. If deadlines have not been met or you have seen an employee shout at a colleague, say what you have seen. Keep your tone neutral.

2. Don’t judge

Ask the employee in a non-judgemental way about what happened. Listen to their answer. When managers fail to listen, employees become defensive. Acknowledge the employee’s view of the situation. Better understanding of an event may change how we interpret the facts we have witnessed and our ideas of how they may be best addressed.

For example, if the employee who hasn’t met deadlines is stressed because they are coping at
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time to process and giving them some autonomy helps to defuse emotional tension and leads to more positive outcomes for the employee, their manager and their organisation.

*This is part of an ongoing series on 'bad' management. Read more in the series here.*