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Six effective ways to have that difficult conversation at work

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Six effective ways to have that difficult conversation at work

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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Six effective ways to have that difficult conversation at work

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That difficult conversation can be made much worse if the strategy is poor. Image sourced from www.shutterstock.com

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.

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

home with an ageing parent who has Alzheimer's disease, training in project management or time management is unlikely to lead to improvements. The employee shouting at a colleague may come from a culture where such behaviour is seen as a sign of authority or strong leadership. The employee needs to understand the expectations and values of the context in which they are now operating.

Treat the information which employees give you as confidential unless you both agree it should be shared. It is very easy to lose trust if you pass on information gleaned in a conversation with an employee.

3. Allow time out

When people are given feedback, no matter how constructive the intent, they need time to process it. Constructive feedback suggests that there is some element of their performance which is unsatisfactory. Whether they were previously aware of it or not, they have to integrate this feedback into their self-image before they can start thinking rationally about how they might address it.

4. Ask the employee what THEY think

After a break (may be next day or even later), ask the employee to summarise the situation and what options they can think of to address. Employees are more familiar with the detailed processes they follow than are their managers. They can therefore often come up with good ideas for improvement. When managers regularly listen to their employees and take their ideas on board, employees are likely to come forward with more ideas.

Managers can add value by being familiar with the big picture and with other teams. This may help identify alternatives outside the employee's immediate scope so that the employee is aware of the full range of options before choosing the way forward. When employees take ownership of a solution, they are more committed to implementing it than if they are told what to do by their manager. Agree what will be done by when and what evidence both manager and employee will accept to show that the situation has been resolved or improved.

5. Offer support

This may take the form of training, coaching, time or other resources identified as useful for implementing the option chosen. For an employee with an ageing parent, the employer may be able to offer more flexible working arrangements or compassionate leave while the employee is making different care arrangements. The employee seen shouting at another employee must accept that they need to change before any counselling or training will be effective.

It is important for each employee to understand what the organisation and their immediate manager expect and to meet those expectations every day. Framing the conversation positively and highlighting the support available motivate the employee to achieve the improvements agreed.

6. Acknowledge improvements

Follow up and acknowledge when improvements are made. If no improvement is noticeable by the agreed timeline, have another conversation to hold the person to account. It takes time to achieve a sustainable change which becomes part of the employee's natural everyday behaviour rather than something they have to think about consciously.

Noticing when employees implement the new behaviour motivates them to continue their efforts until the change becomes an integral part of their work pattern.

While difficult conversations are indeed difficult, listening to the other person, allowing them

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](#).