Success Summaries

Crucial Conversations: Tips for Addressing Issues in the Workplace

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Crucial Conversations: Tips for Addressing Issues in the Workplace

We’ve all had the experience of needing to have a difficult conversation with someone at work. A conversation that, if it took place, would improve life at work for ourselves and for everyone else on our team, but fear keeps us mute and we continue to put the conversation off. Meanwhile the offending individual continues, often unknowingly, to perform below expectations, sometimes exhibiting toxic behaviors that affect the morale of our entire team.

The consequence of not having that uncomfortable conversation is costly; disengaged employees, less efficiency, less productivity, failed projects, dissatisfied customers, poor quality service and low morale. Numerous studies site the financial impact on organizations and it is staggering. The Gallup Organization estimates that there are 22 million actively disengaged employees costing the American economy as much as $350 billion dollars per year in lost productivity including absenteeism, illness, and other problems that result when employees are unhappy at work. If someone on your team is not performing, you can bet that employees are discussing it and it’s affecting morale.

Directly addressing an individual with a performance issue at work requires empathy and skill but ultimately, it requires the courage to actually go ahead and do it. The more experience you have facing these issues head-on, the more adept you will become at it. If you’re unsure of how to best approach a crucial conversation, here are some tips to guide you:

Identify the real issue

To accomplish this, ask yourself two important questions: “What exactly is the behavior that is causing the problem?” and “What is the impact that the behavior is having on you, the team or the organization?”

It is imperative that you are able to identify and articulate the issue in two or three succinct statements. If not, you risk going off on a tangent during the conversation or overwhelming the individual with too many unrelated issues. The lack of focus on the central issue will derail the conversation and sabotage your intentions.

Know your objective

What do you want to accomplish with the conversation? What is the desired outcome? What are the non-negotiables? If you could write your own story, what type of ending would you desire? What type of conversation and interaction needs to occur for you to reach this ending? Once you have determined
this, plan how you will close the conversation. Don’t leave the conversation without clearly expressed action items. What is the person agreeing to do?

What kinds of support are you committed to provide? What obstacles might prevent these actions from taking place? What do you both agree to do to overcome potential obstacles? Schedule a follow up to evaluate progress and definitively reach closure on the issue at hand.

**Be prepared to listen and remain open-minded**

Adopt a mindset of inquiry. Spend a little time to reflect on your attitude toward the situation and the person involved. It’s important to be self-aware of your pre-conceived notions as they will predetermine your reaction and interpretations of the other person’s responses. It truly pays to approach such a conversation with the right mindset—which in this context, is one of inquiry. A good leader diagnoses a situation before determining the right course of action. Be open to hear first what the other person has to say before reaching closure in your mind. Even if the evidence is so clear that there is no reason to beat around the bush, we still owe it to the person to let them tell their story. A good leader remains open and seeks a greater truth in any situation.

**Know how to begin**

Some people put off having the conversation because they don’t know how to start. The best way to start is with a direct approach. “Janet, I want to discuss what happened at our meeting this morning when Stacy asked about the missed deadline. Let’s grab a coffee tomorrow morning to chat.” Or: “Brian, I want to go over some of the issues with XYZ customer and some concerns that I have. Let’s meet tomorrow morning to problem-solve.”

Being upfront is the authentic and respectful approach. You don’t want to ambush people by surprising them about the nature of the “chat.” Make sure your tone of voice signals discussion and not inquisition, exploration and not punishment.

**Choose the right place to have the conversation**

Calling people into your office may not be the best strategy since, sitting in your own turf, behind your desk, shifts the balance of power too much on your side. Be cognizant of your body language and the message it’s sending. For example, leaning forward toward the person rather than leaning back on your chair, can carry a subtle message of your positive intentions and convey; “We’re in this together. Let’s problem solve so that we have a better workplace.” Consider holding the meeting in a neutral place.
such as a meeting room where you can sit adjacent to each other without the desk as a barrier. Don’t exclude the local coffee shop.

**Preserve the relationship**

A leader who has high emotional intelligence is always mindful to limit any collateral damage to a relationship. It takes years to build bridges with people and only minutes to blow them up. Think about how the conversation can fix the situation, without erecting an irreparable wall between you and the person. It is your responsibility as a leader to understand and manage the emotions in the discussion.

In some cases, you may have to respond to a person’s tears, anger or stone silence. At all costs we must be mindful of preserving the person’s dignity – and treating them with respect – even if we wholeheartedly disagree with them. This means acknowledging that we recognize what emotion they are feeling. If there are tears, offer the person a tissue and allow them time to gather his or her thoughts. If a person is angry, acknowledge that you can see they are clearly frustrated and give them a moment to calm down so you can both be in a mindset of listening. If the individual is simply silent during the meeting, acknowledge the observe behavior by candidly saying, “I don’t know how to interpret your silence.” This will give them an opportunity to express themselves, especially if they are an introvert and still determining what they wish to express.

**Be consistent**

Ensure that your objective is fair and that you are using a consistent approach. If the person thinks you have one set of rules for this person and a different set for another, you’ll be perceived as showing favoritism. Nothing erodes a relationship faster than perceived inequality. Employees have long-term memories of how you handled situations in the past. Aim for consistency in your leadership approach. We trust a leader who is consistent because we don’t have to second-guess where they stand on important issues such as corporate values and acceptable behaviors.

**Be comfortable with silence**

There will be moments in the conversation where silence occurs. Don’t rush to fill it with words. Pauses in the conversation allow us to digest and interpret what was said. A pause also has a calming effect and can help us connect better. For example, if you are an extrovert, you’re likely uncomfortable with silence, as you’re used to thinking while you’re speaking. This can be perceived as steamrolling or overbearing, especially if the other party is an introvert. Introverts want to think before they speak. Stop talking and allow them their moment—it can lead to a better outcome.
Follow-up after the conversation

Many times after having a difficult discussion it is human nature to avoid the person or *walk on egg shells* around them – don’t. Make a strong effort to follow up with them as soon as possible. Often the individual we just confronted was so focused on the issues we addressed that they failed to hear anything we had to say after that, missing the most important part of the conversation – the action steps. Be sure to check-in via email, phone or live interaction, in a timely manner, to ensure they are clear on exactly what steps they need to take to improve and to listen to any questions or concerns that may have arisen.

Develop your conflict resolution skills

Managing conflict effectively is one of the vital skills of leadership. Observe what has worked well in previous difficult conversation and where you’ve had challenges. Work with a mentor on addressing the areas that you wish to improve. Read more articles, books and tips on how to manage through conflict. Conflict is always going to be a natural part of human interaction. Making a conscious effort to improve how you handle these conversations will benefit you immensely.

While most of us avoid conflict or confronting others the reality is that it is unavoidable. Overcoming our fear and having these crucial conversations are not only critical to leading teams, but necessary to maintain authentic relationships. This is one leadership skill that will benefit you throughout your life, both inside and outside the workplace.
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