

Critical Conversations Between Managers and Employees – Do We Have To?

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Do I have to tell my employees when they're not performing to my expectations? Shouldn't they already know what they're supposed to be doing? After all, I hired them based upon what they told me during our interview.

When was the last time you sat down with one of your employees and provided feedback on a performance issue? Was it received positively? Did you receive the behavior change that you were hoping to receive?

Many managers are reluctant to enter into these types of conversations for some of the following reasons:

1. They don't want to "bite the hand that feeds" – If I upset this employee, he/she may give me the silent treatment or become passive-aggressive for a period of time, and I need all of my employees to be productive, even if not at 100 percent.
2. They don't want to run the risk of engaging the employee in an argument if the employee disagrees with the message.
3. They are reluctant to inadvertently step on a legal landmine if the employee can link the message to a discriminatory action.
4. It's difficult for them to engage in critical conversations that are confrontational, and they want to be liked.

So, if it is too difficult to enter into this type of conversation and run the risk of having it backfire on you, why do it in the first place? Because the risk of not doing it is greater for the following reasons:

1. Employees will believe that they are performing well if they don't receive information to the contrary; so they will continue performing at that level (including showing up to work late, taking off too much time or behaving inappropriately in the workplace).
2. Managers have a tendency to reach a breaking point when less than adequate performance continues. Managers may reach a point where they become irate

and want to fire the employee without having had any prior conversations — surprise!

3. Co-workers will have to pick up the slack and become disgruntled; plus the manager will look weak in the eyes of the other employees.

The good news is that there is a process or road map to follow when having to engage in these types of conversations. In fact, there are actually three coaching opportunities:

1. When employees are doing great work: Tell them what they did and why it was great.
2. When employees make an error: Tell them *privately* and help them to determine how they might have done the task differently for a better outcome. Remember, we all make mistakes. Mistakes are how we learn. They are a breakdown on the path to success; not a failure.
3. When employees are on a dead-end path: If an employee continues to make the same mistake or continues the same unacceptable behavior repeatedly, follow these steps in this order:
 - a. State what you've observed (e.g., you are 30 minutes late)
 - b. Wait for a response (e.g., traffic was bad, etc.)
 - c. Remind them of the goal (e.g., we've spoken about this before. You need to be here on time because customers are calling, your co-workers have to step in when you're absent, etc.)

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- d. Ask them for a solution (e.g., what are you going to do differently so that we don't have to have this conversation again?)
- e. Agree and document – If the proposed solution makes sense to you, then agree to it and hold the employee accountable for the future. Send the employee a memo detailing the conversation with the stipulation that if the employee wants to remain in the position, then the behavior needs to change immediately and remain sustained, if that's what you want.

Being a manager can be challenging. Employees want managers they can trust to be honest and open with them. Using a process, such as the one outlined above for engaging in critical conversations, can help managers earn the trust and respect of their teams and, most importantly, receive the performance they expect.

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