**HOW TO SET THE STAGE FOR A CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATION: WHAT TO DO BEFORE YOU SAY A WORD**

What you do before you talk with someone about a difficult issue will largely determine what happens during the conversation. How you spend your “thought time” prior to talking with that person has a huge impact on the other “make or break” moment of truth – how the conversation begins.

If you spend your time thinking about the other person’s negative intentions, real or imagined, and getting outraged, if you spend your time ruminating about unpleasant things they have done or unpleasant conversations you’ve had with them, you’re likely to enter the conversation in a negative emotional state and with an antagonistic attitude. Doing so obviously reduces the odds that you will begin the conversation in a skillful, productive manner.

Because the way we begin a difficult discussion has a huge impact on whether the conversation goes well, we want to make sure we get the opening right. Getting the opening right requires getting into a productive emotional state and mind-set beforehand, and thinking things through clearly first.

When we are upset with someone or nervous about talking with them, we are far more likely to spend our time getting even more angry or nervous. It takes a conscious effort and a rational game plan to offset the natural tendency. Think about:

1. Challenging irrational thought processes that reduce your effectiveness and make you miserable.
2. Identify hidden agendas you might have that virtually doom the discussion before it ever begins.
3. Get into a productive, rational mind-set.
4. Think strategically, rather than emotionally.
5. Set the stage for a conversation filled with goodwill and understanding.

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**Questions to Ask Yourself**

As you think about the employee and the upcoming conversation –

Are you mind reading?

Mind reading is when we take our guesses about a person’s motivation, agenda or intention as the truth and then act based on our assumptions. Since we can’t know what’s going on in another’s mind, our guesses are just that and nothing more, guesses, not facts. When we assume our guesses are facts, rather than simple guesses, we can set ourselves up for unnecessary conflict by going into the conversation with a combative, antagonistic mind-set that might be based on totally incorrect perception.

Are you fortune telling?

Fortune telling is taking our predictions of what will happen as fact (e.g. “I know exactly what she’s going to say,” “I know what will happen if I bring that up.” Fortune telling can set us up for unnecessary conflict by leading us to enter the conversation in a confrontational mood. It can set us up for unnecessary wear and tear if our fortune telling involves “seeing” an unpleasant conversation ending off with disastrous results.

Are you indulging yourself in self-righteous outrage?

The strain of this type of thinking puts us on both emotionally and physically rollercoaster. This thinking leads us to a resentful emotional state. (e.g. “He’s doing that just to be passive-aggressive, I’m so tired of his game-playing.”) This is not a helpful thought process if we hope to have a productive conversation.

So, listen to your chatterbox in preparation for the conversation. Alter your thought process to engage in a healthier conversation if you experience any of the above thoughts.

What is your goal?

What do you hope the conversation will accomplish?

Consider your intentions or motivations for the conversation:

* Is it to help them see why you’re right and they’re wrong?
* Understanding their perspective and help them understand yours?
* Achieve a win/win solution?
* Are you willing to hear an alternative perspective and find out your perspective may not be accurate?

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**Actions to Take**

**Focus on trying to understand the other person’s perspective.**

“Seek first to understand.” By devoting part of your preparation time on seeking to understand, you are more likely to generate a balanced, reasonable perspective. When we seek to understand, we recognize that our assessment, no matter how well founded, is still an opinion, a guess and not a fact.

**If you are really upset, vent to someone your trust, when necessary, until the emotional charge has been reduced to a workable level.**

Doing this allows you to calm down enough to get into a more moderate emotional state. And enables the situation a more rational, untainted perspective. This helps you discharge negative emotions, not build more. It shifts the focus to having a constructive discussion.

**Ask someone you trust and respect for their perspective.**

When you are upset, our emotions can distort our perceptions. We can remedy this by getting someone else’s perspective. Because they are not emotionally involved, they are able to see the situation in a more measured, rational way.

**Ask for feedback on how you propose to bring up the conversation.**

Ask someone whom you respect and trust how they would respond if you brought up the issue to them in the way you’re thinking of doing. Give them some background information and ask them how they think the other person might respond. Ask for their suggestions on how you might do it in a more effective way.

***It is very normal to feel anxious before confronting a person regarding workplace concerns. Try to reduce your anxiety and maintain your effectiveness as a supervisor:***

* ***Breathe deeply.***
* ***Speak slowly, clearly and assertively.***
* ***Don’t talk to much, be concise and to the point.***
* ***Relax your facial muscles, unclench your jaw and shrug your shoulders downward.***
* ***Try to make all your gestures and movements slow and smooth.***
* ***Maintain frequent eye contact, but not constant.***
* ***Do not interrupt.***
* ***Allow for silence.***

**HOW TO IDENTIFY IF EMPLOYEES ARE HAVING PROBLEMS**

(It is important to remember that symptoms do not necessarily indicate that an employee has a problem.)

As a supervisor you have a day to day responsibility to monitor the work and on the job conduct of your employees. If you are concerned with an employee begin by documenting your concerns. The documentation will have clear cut evidence that change needs to happen. Know the support systems your company has in place for employees. Be familiar with the company’s policies and procedures and enforce these policies.

Signs to look for:

**Time and attendance issues -**

* Frequent tardiness
* Excessive use of sick leave
* Frequent unplanned absences due to “emergencies.”

**Performance Problems –**

* Missed deadlines.
* Careless or sloppy work.
* Incomplete assignments.
* Production quotas not met.
* Away from work area without permission or for extended periods of time.
* Many excuses for incomplete assignments or missed deadlines.
* Employee does not attend to task at hand, is a “half person” on this job. Lack of being present.
* Faulty analysis/assessment.
* Repeated safety violations, increase in accidents or mistakes in the workplace.

**Relationships at work –**

* Relationships at work have become strained.
* Poor or worsening attitude toward supervisor and/or coworkers.
* Insubordination
* Verbal abuse of others.
* The employee asks coworkers to cover up for being late or not getting job done.
* The employee may be belligerent, argumentative, or short-tempered, especially in the mornings or after weekend/holidays.
* The employee may become a “loner.”

**Behavior at Work-**

* Poor concentration.
* Aggressiveness and inability to get along with coworkers.
* Verbal abuse of others.
* Tired.
* Deterioration in personal appearance, poor hygiene.
* Complains about problems at home.
* Blames others for their shortcomings.
* Disregards safety and/or takes needless risks.
* Frequent personal phone calls.
* Sleeping or nodding off on the job.
* Regularly failing to follow rules/protocols/policies.
* Avoidance of supervisory contact.
* Tremors
* Excessive use of breath mints/mouthwash
* Mood and behavior changes such as excessive laughter and inappropriate loud talk
* Staggering gait or unsteady balance.
* Bloodshot eyes.
* The smell of alcohol, marijuana or other orders.

**Personal**

* Medical problems.
* Car problems.
* Childcare problems.
* Alarm clock.
* Lack of sleep or increased fatigue.
* Withdrawn and/or depressed.
* Divorce, separation, marital problems.
* Financial problems.
* Emotional displays (crying, excited, etc.)
* Blaming others.
* Legal problems.
* Reporting to work hungover. (alcohol/drug use)
* Attitude problems
* Death in family/family illness

When there are performance and conduct problems coupled with any number of these signs, it is time to talk with your employee and get them the help they need. Always keep your Human Resource person in the loop re; an employee’s status.

As a manager look for changes in performance behaviors on three (3) levels:

Level 1 – Intensity: Is it creating a potentially unsafe or hostile work environment?

Level 2 – Frequency: Are there enough small events that warrant an intervention?

Level 3 – Pattern: Is there a pattern that is either time or situation related.

There are two types of performance issues:

1. Those that require immediate actions such as impairment, violence, substance abuse, aberrant behaviors or safety violations.
2. Those that require on going documentation and follow-up actions including a corrective action. These may include: absenteeism, on-the-job absenteeism, work related accidents, work productivity, declining work productivity and poor relationships on the job.

Common Types of Problem Behavior

In general, problem employees fall into two categories:

* Employees causing problems (examples; starting fights or leaving early.)
* Employees with problems (example; financial troubles, marital issues, etc.)

There are two general methods discussed to help supervisors improve employee performance:

1. Counseling
2. The Discipline Process.

Counseling helps employees solve their problems, which enables them to perform better at work.

Supervisors should counsel employees when they need help in determine how to resolve a problem that is affecting their work.

When employees have problems that supervisors are unqualified to help with they should refer employees to Human Resources or the Employee Assistance Program.

Two counseling techniques:

-Direct counseling in which the supervisor asks questions about the specific problem and suggests solutions.

-Nondirective counseling, with the supervisor primarily listening and encouraging the employee to look for the source of the problem and identify possible solutions. All counseling contacts should be documented and kept by the manager and keep HR informed.

Discipline:

In administering disciple, the supervisor explains the significance and consequences of the employee’s behavior. All disciplinary actions should be documented and forward to HR.

*Make sure employees know and understand the rules, policies and procedures of the workplace.*

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**Tips for Coping with Employee Reactions**

**During your interview with the employee, you should be prepared for a wide range of emotional responses.**

**Their Reaction Suggested Response**

Blaming others Stick to the facts; let the record speak for itself.

Crying Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation, but emphasize

 organization’s support by offering the EAP.

Silence Acknowledge that the discussion is awkward for both of you.

Agitation Allow a brief “time-out” then resume discussion. Keep to the

 point and keep it brief.

Emotional appeal Stay focused on your right and obligation to expect appropriate

 Behavior and satisfactory job performance

Defensiveness or denial Stick with the facts, and avoid arguing. Do not assume

 Responsibility for changing the employee’s point of view.

Reveals personal problems Express concern, show empathy…..but focus on work. Offer

 EAP.

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The counseling interview begins with a discussion of what the problem is. Because the counseling often takes place as a result of personal or work problems the employee is having s/he may be emotional during the session. The supervisor should be prepared for emotional or angry outbursts.

Remember that an employee’s personal and/or work problems become a workplace issue when the problem affects the employee’s job performance and threatens the well-being of the employee and other staff members.

Develop a professional employee-manager relationship that fosters trust, communication and leadership. Establish a definitive role between the supervisor and employee, which is essential.

**WHAT TO DO**

1. **Questions**
* Do you have a grip on who this employee is?
* Have you reviewed their progress over the last year?
* What kinds of goals have you set for them in their annual review:
* What goals did the employee set for themselves?
* Have you followed up on their progress or perhaps lack of progress?
* Are they being sufficiently challenged or are they over challenged?
* Do they have the right resources, equipment and space needed to do their job well?
* Do you have the courage and conviction to put the cards on the table? (Example; and let the employees know that bullying behavior isn’t acceptable and that if not curtailed, will have consequences?)
* Do not look for or actively seek knowledge of any employee’s personal problems, good work boundaries are important.
1. **Set aside time to meet.**
* Make private time to meet and come prepared.
* Keep the conversation focused.
* Be clear about the objective of the conversation will help to keep the discussion on track.
* Review the goals you and they set from their prior review.
* Ask them what they see happening in their work right now, and how they assess their present job performance.
* Have them define a problem they are experiencing and ask them how they can resolve it.
* Focus on the subjective performance issues; i.e. work attitude, communication skills, collaboration, and accountability. They are responsible for their behavior and attitudes.
* Determine specific present performance criteria related to employee’s technical skills, alignment and department goals, timeliness/tardiness, accuracy, completeness and thoroughness.
* Listen for what’s not being said.
1. **Offer concrete honest feedback on employee’s performance.**
* Be clear that improvement is expected and that continuing negative behavior will neither be accepted nor tolerated.
* Create an alliance with the employee to work on specific objectives.
* Highlight the balance between the employee’s work performance, technical and subjective, and their awareness of their job effectiveness.
* Expand the awareness of the employee’s role in the workplace culture/environment.
* Schedule specific times for follow-ups.
* Recap the conversation. Recapping helps both of you be clear about expectation. As a manager, do not assume the other person understands everything that needs to be done.
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***Employee, who have clear expectations of what acceptable behavior is, and know that accountability to address performance issues is a requirement, rather than an option, have a greater chance of success in meeting those expectations.***