Say What? Handling the Tough Talks

The ability to give praise for a job well done and to promote hard-working employees may be among your preferred conversations. But, being a manager makes it unavoidable to be the bearer of bad tidings at times.

Though you may not be able to change the content of negative messages, your delivery has major impact on how your words are perceived by the listener. Here’s how to choose the right words for those tense conversations managers can’t avoid.

What you want to say: “You’re not meeting my expectations.”

What you should say: “How do you feel about the projects you’ve worked on in the last six months?”

Confronting an employee about his or her performance is a sensitive conversation. You may (and should) have plenty of written evidence to support your view. Regardless of the details, the employee is likely to react emotionally.

Performance-related or disciplinary-based conversations demand that you choose words that mitigate the level of emotion, according to Linda Hill, author and professor at Harvard Business School. Hill suggests using strategic pronouns to own your perspective throughout the discussion. For example, instead of “You’ve had a lot on your plate and you must be really stressed,” say “I know I feel really stressed when I have a long to do list. How do you feel?”

Hill explains that making assumptions about how your employee feels adds fuel to the emotional fire—even if your intent is to express empathy. Instead, ask the employee to own and express his or her viewpoint; listen without interruption. You don’t have to agree, but it will keep the conversation more professional and productive.
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What you want to say: “I disagree with your approach and can’t let you or the team move forward with it.”

What you should say: “Can you help me understand how we’re approaching X?”

When you empower employees to own their projects and make decisions without your involvement, the more likely they are to feel engaged and happy at work. Yet, you’re ultimately held accountable for their decisions. So how do you let employees know when you don’t agree with their approach, without making them feel defeated or micromanaged?

Approach the conversation so they have to explain the details. As they walk you through the finer points of the plan, ask probing questions like “I’m wondering what might happen if we did X.” Ideally, that conversation should help them identify potential blind spots and points of risk they failed to realize. Even if they don’t, you can use the conversation to give them the necessary feedback that leads to course correction—without making them feel their plans were derailed entirely.

What you want to say: “Executive leadership changed direction and all the work you’ve done on this project the last several months was for nothing.”

What you should say: “I believe we’ve come up with an even better solution for the initiative you’ve been working so hard on. This is how our team is involved with it moving forward.”

Frustrating as changes in direction from higher ups can be for your team, a manager needs to act like the public relations guru of sorts for executive leadership.

Communicate direction from upper management in a way that instills respect for leadership decisions among your team (even if you secretly disagree). Explain the reasons behind decisions, the options that were and were not chosen, and how the new direction ties into your team’s responsibility—even if it’s on a smaller scale than the original plan.

Though weeks of your team’s hard work may be for naught when executives change course unexpectedly, don’t let employees see that you are frustrated as a result. Listen to your employee’s concerns, but encourage them to realize that the new direction will lead to better results for all involved. Employees who feel like their roles are intertwined with the goals of the broader organization tend to feel more strongly about the importance of their tasks.

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Q. I plan to make a supervisor referral to the EAP of an employee who chronically comes to work late. Should I also probe the reasons why? I don’t think it really matters, and I probably won’t get the whole truth, so why risk getting bogged down in excuses?

A. Yes, ask your employee why he or she is coming to work late. The reason for asking is to rule out any issue that could be work-related over which you have control or influence to change. Remember, coming to work on time is a requirement for most jobs, and it is a measurable performance issue. So you have a right to at least ask why he or she is not measuring up. If your employee discloses a work-centered reason for tardiness, try to address it. If your employee mentions a personal problem, accept the answer, but recommend the EAP as a resource for proper help. Talk to the EAP beforehand or provide documentation to the EA professional so proper assessment can be conducted.

Q. I am a new supervisor. I can see right away I am the “one in the middle” with my supervisor above me and the employees below me each needing different things. Tell me the number one mistake I am likely to make as a new supervisor.

A. The number one mistake that you are likely to make as a new supervisor is failing to see your role as a “coach” instead of a “cop.” This slipup results from stereotypes you might hold of what supervisors do, insecurity about your supervisory skills, and fear of not being taken seriously. To reduce the likelihood of making this mistake, develop individual workplace relationships with everyone you supervise. Begin to understand five things about each employee—what their key skills are, what they want to learn more about, what motivates them, how much feedback they want or need, and their preferred form of communication. Down the road, check in to ensure these assessments are indeed correct. This will prevent a “barrier” forming between you and your employee caused by slow, simmering resentment toward you for not meeting his/her needs. If you are unsure about how to approach employees or communicate with them, call the EAP and devise a plan or approach before things get worse.

Q. I have an employee whom I consider lazy, but referral to the EAP for this problem doesn’t sound like the right thing to do. Do you have recommendations about dealing with “laziness?”

A. Some employees may appear disinclined to work or are slow to exert themselves to accomplish required tasks of their job. They may also appear sluggish. You are correct that a referral to the EAP is not the right step initially, but it may come later after you attempt the following work-centered interventions. Hold a discussion with your employee about how he/she feels about the job. Seek to uncover his or her attitudes toward it. Also, ask about his or her personal goals in relation to the work. Be honest, and say you have noticed a slow-moving work style, trouble taking initiative, not always getting things done on time, or other measurable behaviors. Don’t label the employee as lazy. Stress the value of the employee’s position in the organization, and see whether you can elicit a higher level of excitement. If this step fails, then refer them to EAP.