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TRAINING &
WORKSHOPS

Managing Difficult Conversations

and sensitive situations

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Managing Difficult Conversations

Notes to support the session

Contents

Introduction

In all organisations, regardless of size, structure or the type of business involved, managers are expected to get results and there is an implicit assumption that they have all the necessary skills to achieve their objectives. While this is generally true there is one area where supervisors and managers often feel under-powered and where – no matter how good they are at the technical aspects of their job or how well they understand their business – they find themselves stumped or out-manoeuvred. Employees who appear persistently to obstruct or refuse to cooperate can become a thorn in the side of even the most optimistic manager, and what's more their behaviour can ripple out and demoralise others.

All managers and supervisors will have to deal with employees they find difficult during their careers. Trying to get the job done, deadlines met and decisions made, requires participation of all involved. It means better productivity and more durable solutions that are trusted because collective effort has gone into them. Contemporary managers and supervisors understand that in a complex world they cannot possibly have all the answers. Participation, shared responsibility for results and collaborative working are the keys to business success, because they enable the collective wisdom and experience of the group to be drawn on. Furthermore, this type of involvement doesn't just get better results, it also improves morale and leads to a more resilient organisational culture.

This one-day workshop provides an opportunity to consider how to tackle so-called Difficult Employees in a new light. It will cover some of the aspects of a managers role that are so often missing from management training , and provide insight into how to encourage engagement and intervene with uncooperative others who just don't seem willing or able to join in as they should.

We hope you enjoy the day, that you'll find it useful and productive, and that you'll leave the session inspired to approach challenging behaviour with flair and greater confidence. One of the great things about a workshop like this is that it brings together a group of people with a wide collective experience and shared objectives. You'll be surrounded by others who are on the same side as you and with whom you can share ideas and insights. We hope you'll participate enthusiastically and in a spirit of cooperation, help others here achieve their aims too.

Making the most of this event

Taking a day out from work to focus on one aspect of the job is a luxury and also a challenge. While the few hours spent in a learning environment is certainly helpful and can provide insight, it is quite another matter to make that learning stick so that we can call on it and apply the ideas later. Here are a nine pointers to help you get the most out of the day and draw maximum value from it.

Prepare yourself. Make sure you know what you want to get out of the workshop, prepare no more than three action points before you start, and understand what these will enable you to do when you get back to work so that you will be able to judge results later.

Commit fully to the day. "Fortune favours the prepared mind", they say. Once you commit to getting the most out of the workshop by being fully present you'll find that you'll spend less time doubting or second-guessing and more time seeing the possibilities.

Put judgements aside, be open to new ideas. Being open doesn't mean blind acceptance, but it does mean taking what is said at face value and being prepared to consider how an idea might help you in your quest to be a better manager.

Take risks. "If you always do what you always did you'll always get what you always got". Effective learning requires that we move outside our comfort zone and try new things.

Practice, practice, practice. Interpersonal skills cannot be practiced mentally. In order to develop we have to DO something. Today provides an opportunity to start the ball rolling.

Ask relevant questions. If something is not clear, or you are unsure of how it would be applied in your work context, ask. Remember your questions will help and encourage others too.

Be prepared to examine yourself. Real learning requires insight and being open to change cherished ideas about ourselves. We are all on 'a permanent mission of self-discovery' whether we like it or not, and 'open' learners do better than those with a closed mind.

Facilitate learning in others. Working collaboratively with others is a wonderful opportunity to experience the magic that can happen in a group. Help others achieve their aims by asking pertinent questions and practicing the skills discussed today as we go along. Use the breaks to continue conversations and share ideas.

Enjoy the day.

The Focused Conversation

This is a method of leading people through certain phases of reflection, enabling them to process their experience. This helps them relate, and also to reflect more deeply and become aware of aspects of their experience that they might otherwise overlook. You'll practice this approach during the session, and we encourage you to use it as we go through the day.

Think (Objective)

To surface the facts of the case; the directly observable data

What did you see, hear, feel, smell, taste?

What did you hear people say?

Which objects, cards, ... attract your attention?

Feel (Reflective)

To access "gut level" responses, associations, emotions, images

What is it about the data that angers, excites, intrigues, surprises, ... you?

What internal images are triggered by the data?

What does this [situation, experience, ...] remind you of?

Meaning (Interpretive)

To make sense of the situation by articulating the meaning, values, significance, purpose, implications

Questions should highlight the layers of meaning and purpose.

What significance do you attach to the,situation?

What storyline are we living out?

Act (Decisional)

To make future resolves

Questions should allow people to

name their relationship and response(s) to the situation.

How shall we respond to ...? The next time we are confronted with ..., how shall we behave differently?

LISTEN WITHOUT JUDGING AS YOU PARTICIPATE IN THIS EXERCISE.

What is a Difficult Employee?

Labelling anything is only ever of limited value. Labelling a product, diagnosing an ailment, naming types of weather are all essential to effective communication and understanding of course, but as labels tend to stick they can quickly become confused with the character of the thing being labelled. They can also prevent enquiry (once we know what something is, why look any further?).

Labels are judgements, and we tend not to examine our judgements. As Hayakawa says, one of the consequences of hasty judgements in everyday thought "is the temporary blindness they induce" (1990 p. 27). When we have to work with someone whose behaviour challenges us or thwarts our efforts it is only natural that we start to think of them as a 'Difficult Employee'. In itself this is not a problem; we have simply categorised them based on our experience. But it becomes a problem when, instead of seeing John or Mary as somone whose difficult behaviour we find hard to deal with, we look no further than the label we have given them and act on our judgement instead. Briefly, labelling someone else disempowers us because it limits our view and so restricts the range possibilities we allow ourselves.

Having said that, you are probably here today because the label 'Difficult Employees' caught your attention. We'll talk about 'difficult employees' but on the understanding that the term is simply shorthand for a situation which, though apparently complex, is also rich with possibilities if we allow ourselves the opportunity.

So, for example, do you have to manage someone who:

- Is talented and capable but somehow doesn't perform as expected

- Requires a high proportion of your management time

- Is reluctant to follow rules and procedures

- Works to their own timetable, for example arriving late or leaving early

- Is creative in their excuses for not completing work

- Often asks many questions rather than just getting on with the job

- Distracts you or other team members

- Openly challenges you, for example in meetings (or does so covertly)

- Is impolite, condescending or inappropriate?

How to be Outcome oriented

Managers must lead and work collaboratively with individuals and teams if they are to get the results they want. Persuasion and cajoling are of limited value in this regard, and effective managers and supervisors understand the power of using generating well-formed goals with teams and individuals.

However good we are at leading others we must first be clear with ourselves about what we are trying to achieve, and although much is said about goals and goal-setting these days, people frequently fail to hit their targets because the goals are poorly defined in the first place. A manager who complains that an employee fails to comply with instructions or hit targets must first ask him- or herself whether the original instruction was adequate and clear. Abstract or vague goals tend to get similar results, whereas well-formed goals that are developed collaboratively are more likely to be met.

Most people are familiar with SMART goals:

Specific

Clear and unambiguous telling employees exactly what is expected of them

Measurable

If goals are not measurable, employees won't know if they are making progress. Also, 'if you can't measure it you can't manage it'.

Attainable

Well-formed goals need people to stretch a bit, but they must be realistic and attainable by average employees.

Relevant

Employees must feel that the goal is relevant to them. This is why goals should be agreed collaborativley, rather than imposed.

Time-bound

With starting points, ending points, and fixed durations.

•If you wish to set meaningful goals with an individual, even though you may know very well the outcome you want, it is generally more productive to engage with them and help them formulate goals that fit with your objectives or those of the organisation. Start by asking, for example:

•   What is their goal?

- How will they know when they are moving towards it?

- What needs to happen to get things moving in the right direction?

Goal-setting is the one of the cornerstones productivity and, like their architectural counterpart, business goals have to be built with precision. Many of us are familiar with the concept of setting goals, if not in our daily lives, certainly in our professional activities. Most of us too can vividly recall a time when we failed to achieve a target we had set ourselves, hopefully the consequences were not too severe. Whatever the outcome, it is likely that we failed because either we had aimed far too high, or we had not been specific enough in our description of our goal. Our employees can do the same, and they get trapped in a loop.

The power of questions

Questions are the most powerful management tool we have. Communications will be more efficient and more effective when we use well formed questions and results more tangible. Conversely, poor questions will get poor results and may even hold up progress or leave others feeling 'ticked-off' or blamed.

In a complex world no manager can possibly have all the answers (yet many worry that they should!). Participation, shared responsibility for results and collaborative working are the keys to business success, because they means the the collective wisdom and experience of the group can be drawn on.

Despite their fundamental importance we rarely think about the questions we use and there is little training that prepares managers to use them creatively.

Using questions enables managers to use conversations rather than issuing lists of instructions, which in turn can lead to a fundamental shift in working relationships.

Qualities of Questions

The value of properly constructed questions is often not appreciated. Questions are powerful, but they have to be the *right* questions for a given purpose.

Questions can elicit information, but they can also praise, reinforce learning, chastise, threaten, confuse... the list is long. We are concerned here with questions that open possibilities, promote action, review barriers or summarise and recap.

Question styles

EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS	GOOD	BAD
Open ended	Tell me about how your job is going. What do you think about ...?	Where did you learn to do it like that? Do you believe in ...?
Invitational	It would be great to hear about... Would you consider ...? Can we think of some ways...?	Why on earth would you ...? Why don't you ...? Is that the best way...?
Specific	How often does she ...? What would I see happening when ...?	Does she ... much? What will happen if ...? (leading questions)
Interpretive	What might this mean to you? Let's speculate about... If we could imagine a solution...	What does this mean? Why did you do...?
Positive	What might you learn from this? Tell me what you were thinking at that moment.	What's up with ...? What did you think would happen?
Challenging of assumptions	What evidence do you have that ...? How could that be interpreted differently?	What is wrong with ...? What's your feeling about ...?
Planning	Which is the most compelling option? Where is the best place to start?	Here's what to do... OK, it's up to you.
Recap and summarise	What is your summary of what we've agreed? Is there anything we have haven't covered?	Get on with it then. Don't let me down.

Courageous Conversations

Managers are frequently under-confident about tackling staff on issues that may be judged 'sensitive'. When not handled with clarity and confidence, discussions that centre on performance, attendance or timekeeping, or more intimate matters like behaviour or even personal hygiene can create unnecessary tensions with the result that things can get worse, not better.

Courageous Conversations is a way of describing how managers might tackle such topics in a productive, fair and balanced way, enabling them to act with greater confidence, set goals for their conversations and respectfully follow-through with staff. This will help to reduce the risk of misunderstanding, confrontation or grievance and will also encourage more collaborative.

When two or more people converse to deepen understanding or make an informed decision, they are engaging in two types of conversations – dialogue and discussion.

Dialogue

is a reflective learning process in which two or more people seek to understand each other's viewpoints and deeply held assumptions. It is a conversation in which talking and listening by all parties creates a flow of meaning. Out of dialogue emerges a new and shared understanding. Dialogue is a tool for collective exploration of meaning – not a search for the right answer or the best solution.

Discussion

is a conversation in which two or more people intend to come to some form of closure – either by making a decision, reaching agreement, or identifying priorities. Discussion involves convergent thinking focused on tasks. While two or more people build deeper meaning along the way, the real purpose is to come to a meeting of minds and reach some agreement.

Both dialogues and discussions are considered "courageous" when the participants are able to expose the values and check the validity of the assumptions that underlie their actions and views. Building an atmosphere of trust and respect is key to both enabling individuals to participate in courageous conversations and establishing a culture in which courageous conversations and feedback are seen as necessary for improvement.

The 7 Principles of Courageous Conversations

Principle 1: Have the courage to 'surface assumptions'

Without uncovering assumptions, most plans are likely to fail at some point. What is not being said is often more important than what is being said.

Principle 2: Stop worrying or avoiding, make it real

When the conversation is real, change occurs before the conversation is even over. Real conversations are built on shared purpose, not assumptions.

Principle 3: Be present, give it your undivided attention

Our work, our relationships, our lives succeed or fail one conversation at a time. While no single conversation is guaranteed to transform a relationship, any single conversation can. Speak and listen as if this the most important conversation you will ever have with this person.

Principle 4: Tackle your toughest challenge today

Stalemate doesn't occur because we're solving problems; it occurs because we're trying to solve the same problems over and over. The problem named is the problem solved. Confront the real obstacles.

Principle 5: Obey your instincts

Don't just trust your instincts - listen to them. Tune in, pay attention to your thoughts and feelings, and act authentically.

Principle 6: Take responsibility for your emotional wake

The conversation is not *about* the relationship; the conversation *is* the relationship. Delivering your message with honesty and sincerity allows you to speak with clarity, conviction and compassion.

Principle 7: Let silence do the real work

Beware of filling the space with chatter; be comfortable with silence. Slowing down the conversation gives you time to think and for insight to occur. Listen carefully and you can discover what the conversation really wants and needs to be about.

(Adapted form Scott 2002)

Exercises and practice reminders

We are all gifted with interpersonal skills, they are the personal attributes we use all the time to communicate and interact with others, both at work and in life in general. Good interpersonal skills are at the heart of effective management, which is why most employers value them so highly when recruiting. Likewise, these skills translate into good relations with clients if you are in a customer facing role.

Having said that we all possess these skills, some people are naturally more gifted than others. Many of us will have learned this painfully when we have been burdened with a manager who lacked these qualities, or thought them unimportant.

The good news is that these skills can be developed or enhanced with practice. The key word here is practice. Developing interpersonal skills is not an intellectual exercise; it cannot be done just by reading or thinking about it. You have to practice. Use the following pages for reflection and practice and you can start to build your repertoire for handling difficult employees.

Here is a list of basic interpersonal factors to help you think about these qualities in yourself:

Quality or skill	Strong	Average	Weak
I am a good listener			
I am available to others			
I am honest with myself			
I am honest with others			
I express empathy			
I can put myself in others' shoes			
I value others' contributions			
I respect others even if I disagree			
I recognise others' needs			
I control my emotions when upset			
I communicate my needs clearly			

Changing a mindset; working round fixed opinion

Work in pairs

"Strong opinions rest on global categories. If we describe someone we dislike intensely, a single statement usually does it. But if instead we are forced to describe the person in great detail, eventually there will be some quality we appreciate" (Langer, 1989, pp 65-66)

Instructions

Work in pairs, A & B.

Person A: Take a position about a person (C) that you have strong negative feelings about. This can be someone you know, someone you know of, or a figure from public life.

Person B: Engage A in conversation for about a minute to set the scene, then ask them about person C, with the question "Have you thought of someone you dislike?"

In listening to their responses note the key statements that A uses to describe C. Also, observe body language etc as they describe C. From this point use C's name

Openness to new information

Person B: Switch to asking questions that elicit more detailed description of person C (by name). Do this conversationally, using questions such as:

"I realise you don't like them, but I assume some people might, their family or friends for example. What do you imagine they might say about (name)?"

"As a professional (manager), if you had to give a fair and non-judgemental reference for this person, how might you describe them?"

"Has there ever been a time when you have felt differently about them, even a long time ago?"

"When you describe this person are you describing what you think about them, or what you feel about them?"

Summarise and close

On signal from the facilitator, begin to draw the conversation to a close by summarising what you have heard. Be sure to emphasise the more detailed points that contrast with their original positional statements.

Feedback

Share your comments and observations about the exercise with the group.

Learning vs judgements

These two terms refer to two mindsets. They are self-explanatory, and we all have both at our disposal. Judging relates to problems and concerns, whereas learning relates to collaboration, exploration and solutions.

The creative use of questions is the anchor-point of any productive conversation. Though we use them widely we often do so carelessly, with little thought to their construction or what a given question is intended to do. Aim to use a learning mindset when formulating questions.

JUDGING	LEARNING
Know-it-all, expert mindset	Beginner's or student's mindset
What's wrong about something?	What's right about something?
How can I protect or defend myself?	How can I support, serve and empower the other?
I can predict how they will act/the outcome	What (unchecked) assumptions am I making?
How can I get them to see it my way?	What do I need to know about their views?
What will help me get approval or look good to others?	How can I help this other person achieve their outcome?
What can go wrong here?	What are the possibilities here?
I am unwilling to shift my position	I am willing to look for common interests
How can I get what I want now?	How can I handle this best?
How can I 'win' the conversation?	What question should I ask (them/myself) to open up the subject?
How do I get them to see the error of their ways?	What is the kindest and least limiting interpretation I can put on their behaviour?

Giving feedback

Feedback is often confused with criticism. The word criticism invariably carries negative connotations. It's close relative, constructive criticism – though it may be well intentioned – is often simply used as a covert way of doing the same thing; telling somebody else about their 'faults' (in the view of the speaker of course). Feedback is framed in such a way that it engages the hearer's attention and involves them in the discussion about change that would be beneficial. It can strengthen relationships and create an opportunity for everyone's to learn and develop.

AIM FOR THIS	AVOID THIS
Put the listener at their ease. Focus on the collaborative nature of the conversation	Giving the impression that you are telling the person about their errors or faults
Equality of voice. Create a balanced and respectful conversation	Avoid filling every moment with talk, or dominating the conversation
Provide positive on-the-job feedback regularly, comment on successes	Only giving negative feedback when something goes wrong.
Be curious and aim to create conversation from which both parties can learn	'Telling off' or telling the other person what to do or how to act
Listen empathetically for information; seek first to understand	Deciding you know what they mean, based your assumptions
Give constructive information about how the other person might do things differently and what the benefits might be	Use the 'sandwich' approach by wrapping negative comments in two slices of positive
Be specific about behaviour, give examples of things you'd like the them to change	Use general or sweeping statements, or the royal 'we' as in 'we think...' Own your views
Ask for their ideas on how the changes or improvements might come about	Give suggestions about how they might change
Tell them about the help and support (training, mentoring etc) that is available.	Leave them to their own devices and expect them to change without support
Ask genuinely about the other person's thoughts and feelings. Seek too understand	Assume you know what the person is thinking or feeling
Look upon the discussion as an opportunity to improve the working relationship	Look upon the discussion as an opportunity for you to re-assert authority

Closing Doors

Method

To eliminate unforeseen events:

- Outline your understanding
- Put a positive spin where possible (they were doing the best they can)
- Ask if they agree with your summary: "Have I got it right?"
- Ask: "Is there anything else I should be aware of)
- Discuss, then summarise again... etc.

Example

"It seems you've had a lot to contend with, what with family illness and so on. I see why it has been difficult for you to get to (work on time/meet your deadlines, or what- ever)". Then your car broke down which was really unfortunate, and soon after than you found you had been re-graded, which must have been a surprise and I realise you have had to brush up on a few things."

"All in all you seem to have been doing your best to meet the challenge, and, before we go any further, is there anything else that can go wrong?"

Pause for a response, explore (see Egan)

"I'm here to help but I can't do your job for you and I think we both need to be clear that you feel able to do what's required of you and that there won't be any more intrusions or demands that take you away from work."

Pause for confirmation

"Thank you, I can see you are committed to this. One last thing. I know you said that nothing could go wrong, but suppose something did. If you were in my place how would you suggest I handle it?... "

Commentary

Some people constantly come up with explanations and excuses. This often works for them because conversations around behaviour and performance can be vague. Failure to anticipate 'what could go wrong' leaves them a get-out when something does, (whether it is real or invented).

Listening

Listening is an under rated skill. It is the most important aspect of effective communication and 'First seek to understand' is a sound guiding principle.

Good listening is a dynamic and unfolding process which builds rapport which helps the speaker to clarify their thinking, as well as enabling the listener to understand.

AIM FOR THIS	AVOID THIS
Make the speaker the total focus of your attention	Avoid promoting your own views
Allow silences in the conversation	Avoid filling every moment with talk
Listen to what is said fully, taking in non-verbal as well as verbal information	Thinking about the next thing you will say; preparing a response or a rebuttal
Still your mind to be receptive to what is said and how it is said	The distraction of your own thought processes, e.g. analysis and judgement
Listen empathetically for information; seek first to understand	Deciding you know what they mean, based your assumptions
Allow the conversation to follow its own natural course	Avoid changing topics or 'steering' the discussion
Check what you are hearing by feeding back conversationally your understanding	Parroting their words os simply repeating a list of what they have told you
Feed back, or ask about, feelings as well as verbal content. Acknowledge that their experience involved emotions as well as actions	Delivering your understanding of their circumstances as a dry, abstract or simply action focused account
Reflect back your understanding, this will help the speaker reformulate their own meaning and clarify their thinking	Telling the speaker where they went wrong, what your opinion is, or what to do next
Ensure that they really agree with your summary (not just being polite). Try again If your summary is not well received.	Acting as if the shortcomings are theirs if they do not agree with your summary
Thank them sharing with you and affirm something about the time, effort or trust it took for them to discuss this with you.	End the conversation abruptly without recognising that it it may have been difficult for them to share this with you.

Dialogue vs Debate

Dialogue is a distinctive kind of communication that allows people to connect and build shared meaning. Compared with discussion – where people present ideas with the aim of putting forward the strongest or most persuasive view – dialogue fosters a collaborative exchange of ideas aimed at mutual respect and understanding.

Rather than a competitive collision of opposites that fosters more disagreement, frustration and confusion, dialogue is a shared process; a collaborative exploration that seeks to understand another's opinion by first showing deep understanding of their position.

DEBATE	DIALOGUE
Adversarial: attempts to prove the other side wrong	Collaborative: people work together to find a shared view and common understanding
About winning: assuming that there is a right answer and one has it	Exploring: assuming that there are pieces to an answer shared by many
A closed-minded attitude; dogmatic determination to be right	An open-minded attitude; openness to change and being wrong
Listening for flaws; making counter-arguments	Listening to understand; making links and revealing shared views
Defending assumptions as fixed positions or 'truth'	Surfacing assumptions for discussion and evaluation
Criticising the other sides position or beliefs	Re-examining all positions, understanding values
Defending one's own views against those of others	Accepting that others' views might improve one's own
Treats communication as a transaction	Treats communication as a relationship
Affirm's one's own point of view	Enlarges and possibly changes the views of both sides

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