

Having 'the talk': Wise words for discipline discussions

Updated 11/20/19

Being an effective manager means confronting those "challenging" employees who, while typically good at their jobs, too often display unprofessional or downright obnoxious behavior.

Simply tolerating such workers is a finger-in-the-dike approach, and it runs counter to two traits of good managers—leadership and decisiveness. Managers who silently put up with such behavior will undermine their own authority.

The best way to tackle such problems is to meet with employees right when you spot the problem behavior. Follow these guidelines for discipline discussions, which have the side benefit of protecting the organization from employee claims that they weren't treated fairly.

Don't procrastinate

As hard as it is to approach an employee about a performance issue or to break the news of an upcoming layoff, do not put off the inevitable.

The sooner you discuss a performance problem with an employee, the sooner the problem can be rectified. Similarly, there are benefits to notifying employees about an impending layoff as soon as possible after you get the go-ahead from upper management to do so; for example, employees will have more time to prepare, and you'll give them accurate information—before rumors and misinformation start to circulate.

Plan ahead

Before having a difficult discipline discussion, try identifying your ideal outcome, being able to clarify the issues in an objective way (e.g., being able to describe the problem behavior and provide objective data to support your statements without personally attacking the employee), being prepared to listen (without getting defensive) to what the employee says in response, and creating an action plan to address the issue.

When providing negative feedback about performance, be prepared to state the specific problem and, if applicable, ways to rectify it.

For example, if the problem is attendance, you will need to tell the employee how many times he or she was absent or tardy, remind him or her of your company's attendance policy, and explain the ramifications of not complying with it.

Consult with HR

Under certain circumstances, such as when you plan to terminate or discipline an employee, you should touch

base with your human resources (HR) department first. HR can help ensure that the [termination](#) or other proposed discipline is justified and advise you on what you should (and should not) say during your conversation, so you avoid violating state and federal employment laws.

Most managers would prefer not to have a difficult conversation with an employee, but you can make the process easier by having the conversation in a timely manner before a small problem grows into a larger one—and, likely, leads to an even more difficult conversation.

Planning ahead for what you want to accomplish during the meeting, creating an action plan, respecting the individual's feelings and privacy, and getting input from HR also can help make difficult conversations easier.

The Meeting: Respect privacy

Meet with the employee in a closed-door office or conference room. It will be easier for the employee to hear negative feedback or bad news in private than in his or her cubicle or an open area, where co-workers are likely to overhear the discussion.

Explain the problem, impact

When you sit down with the employee, describe the behaviors and tell the employee firmly that those behaviors must stop. Point out the offending behavior using the D-I-S method:

Direct. Precisely pinpoint the problem—don't beat around the bush. Too often, managers fail in their counseling efforts because they skip this basic, yet uncomfortable step. Don't feel bad about being direct. Every manager has the right to demand that employees behave in a courteous and cooperative manner.

Immediate. Talk with employees right after you see (or hear about) offending behavior. That makes it harder for the employee to explain away your words.

Specific. Explain concrete examples of the employee's actions, how they affect co-workers and the consequences. A vague accusation like, "We hear you're being rude to co-workers," isn't as effective as, "Telling Mary her haircut looks like a rat's nest is impolite and it won't be tolerated."

Make sure the employee understands the negative impact of his behavior on morale, productivity, service, legal risks, etc. Gain agreement with the employee that a problem exists. And discuss the consequences if the problem continues.

Choose your words carefully

Paul Falcone, author of *101 Tough Conversations to Have with Employees*, chooses his words carefully when he has to counsel employees—and he wants you to do the same.

Falcone urges managers and HR pros to tackle tough workplace conversations head-on—but he doesn't want you to enter the battle unarmed. That's why he developed a series of "scripts" to use when speaking off the top of your head just won't do. Covering an array of topics—from bad breath to time card fraud—Falcone's language emphasizes treating employees with respect, politeness and firmness.

The result, he says: Communication that alerts the employee to the problem, suggests solutions and asks the employee to take responsibility for resolving the issue.

Here are some examples of his approach:

Stopping attitude problems

- “Lisa, I need your help. You know they say perception is reality until proven otherwise. I feel like you’re either angry with me or the rest of the group...”
- “I may be off in my assumption, but that’s an honest assessment of the perception you’re giving off...”
- “I just want you to know that I wouldn’t treat you that way in front of others. I have too much respect for you to do that...”
- “Let me ask you, how would you feel if you were the supervisor and one of your staff members responded that way in front of your team?”
- “Likewise, how would it make you feel if I responded to your questions with that kind of tone or body language?”

Curbing foul language

- “Jim, this isn’t about you any longer—it’s about your co-workers and our company.”
- “When someone puts us on notice that they’re no longer comfortable with the curses, loose banter and jokes that arguably become pervasive in the workplace, then in the eyes of the law, the whole company is placed on notice. At that point, we no longer have the discretion to laugh it off or ignore it...”
- “In fact, if we do, we could have a hostile work environment situation on our hands, and as you know, hostile work environment claims are a subset of sexual harassment, which in turn falls under our company’s anti-discrimination policy.”
- “In short, we’re putting you on notice that the language and behavior have to stop immediately.”
- “Oh, and, Jim, there’s one more thing: I’m not saying this to scare you. It’s just that I want you to be fully educated on the matter. If the company were to be sued, you would also be named as an individual defendant in the lawsuit.”
- “And in those circumstances, the company’s legal team wouldn’t necessarily protect you. In short, you would be on your own to find your own lawyer and pay damages that arise from the claim.”

Discuss the solution, follow-up

Don't let such a meeting end without deciding on the best course of action. Generate solutions to correct the problem—even if that just means having the person confirm that "I won't do that anymore." Gain commitment from the employee on his or her role in solving the problem.

Then establish a clear follow-up strategy. Determine how and when you and the employee will review progress. Set a specific date (or dates) for future check-in meetings.

Document, document

After the discipline discussion, managers should write a summary to put in the employee's file. Discuss specifics with HR.

This summary should be just that—a summary of the problem discussed. It should cite specific examples, the requested improvement (and timeline) and a proposed follow-up plan. The summary should be less than one page and completed in less than one day after the meeting.

Use the 2x2x2 formula

After a disciplinary meeting with an off-site employee, use the 2x2x2 formula to ensure consistent follow-up.

Two days after the meeting, call the employee to review key points and ensure you're both on the same page. Express faith in the person's ability to improve performance and/or behavior. Two weeks after the meeting, call again to check in. Make sure the employee is on the right track to improve. Two months later, give a progress report and solicit employee feedback.