

Emotional rescue: How to help angry employees vent



Say one of your employees walks into your office all red-faced and angry. He starts dropping verbal bombs and loudly complaining about a co-worker's lazy work habits.

How should a manager respond? Start giving advice? Remain silent? Ask about the person's feelings? Request that the person leave, calm down and return later?

All of the above are typically the wrong responses—and for different reasons.

Use the following do's and don'ts to help employees vent about stressful work problems and think about solutions:

The do's

✓ **Do allow the employee to talk.** Avoid arguing with the employee, becoming defensive or taking the rant personally. Let the person speak his or her piece. Don't interrupt or try to silence the employee.

✓ **Do acknowledge the problem.** Even if you think employees are overreacting, it's important to validate their perception. Show empathy and concern by saying, *"I understand why you're upset."*

✓ **Do follow up with short questions** that focus on words the person uses to express the problem. Example: *"I do more than my share of the work."* Response: *"Tell me more about that."* Asking questions like *"What frustrates you the most?"* aren't judgmental and communicate sincere interest.

✓ **Do zero in on words such as "always" and "never."** Employees typically use such words to justify anger when complaining about their most frustrating problems. Example: *"I always do more work than Kevin!"*

✓ **Do document the rant.** It's best to have a witness (other manager or HR rep) in any meeting that could turn confrontational. Take notes after. Make a record of any insulting words or gestures. Notes are important because an angry employee may say something that contradicts a lawsuit he or she files later.

✓ **Do act within your authority.** If you can solve the problem, promise that you will ... and then follow through. If you can't, point them in the right direction.

The don'ts

It's natural to immediately ask an upset employee to calm down. But the request appears to invalidate feelings and can increase frustration. Express willingness to listen. Other tips:

- × **Don't automatically agree with the employee.** Approval could make it appear you're taking sides and set up false expectations. On the other hand, don't disagree because it could increase frustration.
- × **Don't remain silent.** It can be interpreted as indifference.
- × **Don't ask, "How do you feel?"** It sounds condescending.
- × **Don't tolerate threats.** If the employee becomes verbally abusive or even hints at physical violence, leave the room and contact HR. Make sure to document the incident, including how it made you feel.
- × **Don't ignore your own feelings.** Such confrontations can be difficult for managers. Remain calm and don't take the words personally, particularly if an employee complains about management. Remember that the person probably has already vented to co-workers. Employees tend to express frustration first to peers.

Becoming a better listener: 4 easy steps

Sometimes managers are too busy thinking about their response than listening to employees. Effective listeners use a four-step process:

1. Listen to the total message. Before you begin to frame your response, listen to everything the person has to say and give 100% of your attention. Consider the words from his or her perspective—not yours.

Show you care by suspending all activities. Don't flip through papers or glance at your computer screen.

2. Prove your understanding by using nonverbal signals. Doing so sets a comfortable level for the conversation and encourages the other person to keep talking. Some positive nonverbal signals:

- Moving from behind the desk.
- Maintaining eye contact.
- Leaning forward slightly.
- Raising your eyebrows when the speaker makes a significant point.
- Nodding to indicate agreement.

3. Use open-ended probes. These are questions that allow the other person to respond at length, rather than with just a "yes" or "no" response. Open-ended questions begin with words like "why," "how," "explain" or "describe."

Be aware of the number of open-ended questions you ask. Then try to increase the number. You'll find the quality of your communication improves dramatically.

4. Paraphrase what you hear. Prove your understanding by briefly restating the information you've just heard or by asking a question that proves you know the main idea.

You don't do this to prove that you were *listening*, but that you *understand*. There's a big difference.