

How to tactfully get your employees out of their comfort zones



It's no secret that workers generally tend to prefer the familiar when it comes to their jobs. They know what to expect and have confidence in their ability to perform up to par.

But there are times when a manager may need or want to ask team members to do something different. Company policy changes might necessitate a new procedure. Or perhaps the duties of a co-worker who will be out for a few weeks must be covered.

Maybe even you simply have a gut feeling that if given a chance, a certain staff member would thrive in uncharted territory such as representing the company at a conference.

While resistance to change may be the first reaction, it certainly doesn't need to be the final one. Consider these hesitancy-reducing strategies when asking your team to broaden their horizons:

Think before you speak

"Framing is everything. If you know an employee resists branching out of his/her comfort zone, it's important to acknowledge that when presenting the task," says Leigh Steere, co-founder of Managing People Better, LLC. She suggests opening with statements such as "I realize that you prefer to do XYZ types of tasks. However, for the next two weeks, I need you to help me with ABC because ..."

"By including the words 'help me,' you appeal to the employee's desire to please. Most employees want to be helpful, not resistant," Steere says. "By including a reason, you allow the employee to understand why you are making your request."

Cite past successes

Making connections between the new request and things the person has already mastered can build confidence. For instance, someone being asked to make a presentation to a potential client may view the assignment in a more positive light if you mention how well-received her PowerPoints are at staff meetings.

Provide assistance

Stress arises when people feel helpless, so assure the person that he or she will have plenty of support. This might entail assigning someone with more experience to work alongside them for the first day, checking in

regularly to answer any questions, or offering appropriate tutorials and written guidelines.

Reassure that perfection isn't expected

Fear of failure keeps many workers from venturing outside of their normal activities. Knowing that management realizes that new skills take time to develop can reduce anxiety and help workers focus on the task rather than on the judgment of others.

"Emphasize that mistakes or slow speed are part of the learning curve," Steere says. She suggests saying something like, "Just do your best. We don't expect you to be speedy at this at first. And you may make a couple of mistakes here and there, but that's OK and to be expected when learning ABC."

Break down goals into achievable units

An idea that comes across as "impossible" is bound to ruffle feathers. Splitting the ultimate goal into manageable parts restores calmness.

"Every team member feels more comfortable by having set objectives with output and time goals against which the expectations are set," says Alan Guinn, managing director of The Guinn Consultancy Group, Inc.

To get the ball rolling, it can pay to start with something relatively easy to accomplish. Then, build on this momentum as confidence levels and skill-sets grow.

Offer feedback and encouragement

Lastly, remember the power of kind words. Constructive criticism lets employees know that you are interested in their progress and didn't just "dump" a task on them. Similarly, show that you notice and appreciate their efforts.

Phrases such as "I see you're working really hard at learning ABC" or "I am very pleased with your consistent improvement" encourage workers to excel at something new—and set the stage for future ventures out of the comfort zone.