Giving feedback to an overly sensitive worker

It's hard to talk to people who take everything personally. They cry, they get angry, they clam up for days.

Fortunately it is possible to cut through the emotional barriers and tell overly sensitive employees what they need to know about improving their performance. Here's how:

Act quickly. The longer you wait to give feedback, the less useful it becomes. Regardless of the employee's sensitivity, you'll both benefit if you provide input while the problem is fresh in your mind.

Don't sugarcoat your message. Starting off with "Please don't take this the wrong way …" or "I hate to bring it up, but …" cues overly sensitive listeners that something bad is about to happen and makes them defensive from the start. Instead, get right to the point.

Be specific. The more general your comments are, the easier it is for overly sensitive people to misinterpret them as personal attacks. Be clear about expectations and the results you want. Keep the focus on behavior, not on personality.

Ask for input. Show overly sensitive employees that you are interested in their ideas and feelings. Listen to their responses. Paying attention is often enough to demonstrate that you have their best interests in mind.

Downplay overreactions. If an employee overreacts, let that behavior run its course. Recognize the person's emotions ("I can see you're upset"), but don't try to argue employees out of their feelings. And, don't get drawn into taking their reactions personally yourself.

Supply necessary resources. Make sure overly sensitive employees have the information, tools and training they need for improvement. Don't expect them to self-correct in a vacuum.

Show confidence. Encouragement will help your overly sensitive employees feel better about their work. Watch for opportunities to praise them.