

Attitude, absence & foul language: 3 scripts for those conversations you'd rather not have

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 three 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?"

Calling out absenteeism patterns

- "Sarah, now that we've discussed the number, or quantity, of incidents, we've got to discuss the quality, so to speak. Yes, I look at the number of unscheduled absences. But I also look to see when they're occurring on the calendar."
- "In your case, two or three of the incidents either happened on a Friday or a Monday, and that's a separate problem in and of itself."
- "The way we look at it, any time an employee takes more than 50% of his or her time off around weekends and holidays, then we may have a 'pattern' problem on our hands."
- "Yes, three occurrences of unscheduled absence won't trigger anything formal at our company in terms of a disciplinary response. And two or three incidents occurring on Mondays or Fridays may be pure coincidence. But I need you to become very sensitive to this issue as well."
- "In short, I need you to fix both areas. Can I count on you to do that?"

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."