

Confrontations: The Toughest Part

BY RANDY G. PENNINGTON



The challenge of confronting poor performance is described by most leaders as the toughest part of managing employees. Now imagine the challenge of having to confront a customer, colleague, competitor or even a supervisor when the individual involved is a volunteer.

Yet, at some point, every volunteer leader will likely face the need to address performance or behavior that is holding an organization back.

WHY CONFRONTING PERFORMANCE IS DIFFICULT

The mere thought of discussing a problem is unpleasant for many people. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. We tend to be uncomfortable with conflict and are oftentimes not even sure how to pick the right words. We also don't want to be perceived as using our managerial roles to look superior.

Another layer of complexity is added when the other person is a volunteer. What happens if they become angry and leave the organization? What if their departure is disruptive or their responsibilities fall on someone else? If the individual we need to confront is a customer, colleague, competitor or boss, there are other challenges to face. Will we lose business or strain an existing working relationship? What happens if the other person points out our shortcomings in defense of their own? Will a competitor retaliate by saying uncomplimentary things about us in the marketplace?

All of these concerns are real and they share one common factor. It is this worry or concern about the personal impact that deters us from acting. Our worries aside, there are three consequences of failure

to talk to others about their problem performance or behavior. First, we place the other person in a situation where they will be viewed as less than effective. Second, our leadership compatibilities, reputation, and credibility can be questioned. And third, the organization may fail to achieve its goals.

FIVE KEY STRATEGIES

Here are five strategies for holding effective discussions about performance or behavior that is not meeting your expectations.

Change your purpose. Most people equate discussing a performance or behavior problem with punishment or criticism. But what if you reframed your purpose? The reason for bringing it to their attention is because you want them to succeed. You never want others to believe that you chose not to say something that could have helped them become more effective.

Acknowledge the obvious. It is natural to feel uncomfortable. Acknowledging the awkwardness of the situation humanizes you and decreases the odds of the other person becoming defensive. For example say, "Joe, this is a little uncomfortable since you are a customer, but I know that you would want me to mention it if I saw an opportunity to help you succeed."

Focus on positive results and performance - not the person. There is always a chance that your comments will be taken personally. You can minimize that possibility by stressing your desire to help the person achieve positive results. Avoid words like bad attitude or disruptive. Instead, focus on specific examples of the performance or behavior and the impact it is having on the team or organization's performance.

Ask, don't tell. Ask individuals for their input and perspective, ideas on the best way to resolve the issue and how you can best help them. Dictating a specific course of action can work when you are dealing with an employee. Conversely, it is an excellent way to ruin a relationship and engender resistance with a volunteer.

Leverage the strength of your relationship. These communication techniques are linked to the strength of your relationship with the person you are confronting. If your previous interactions worked to build their trust and confidence, then they will likely perceive your feedback as your way of helping them succeed. Put simply, you will have earned the right to be heard and accepted as a credible source of feedback based on the respect you have earned in previous encounters.

Confronting and correcting poor performance is one of the most difficult aspects of being a leader. However, this does not mean you should avoid it. Most people want to do a good job. When you approach someone with openness, honesty and respect, you are likely to receive an appreciative response.

Randy Pennington is author of Results Rule! Build a Culture that Blows the Competition Away and On My Honor, I Will... He helps leaders build cultures committed to results, relationships and accountability. Send your ideas to Randy@penningtongroup.com. Follow his blog at www.penningtongroup.com.