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Tips on Having Difficult Conversations

Don't Delay That Tough Conversation Any Longer

It's often difficult to have conversations about sensitive subjects. Whether you need to tell someone you disagree with her approach or are upset by her behavior, it's all too easy to put it off in hopes of finding the "perfect time." Chances are, that time will never come. You'll be better off if you stop procrastinating and make the conversation happen. Request a time to meet. Use a non-threatening medium, such as email or voicemail, to ask what time would be best to discuss a sensitive matter. You'll likely still worry before you sit down with the person, but by framing the conversation upfront, you'll have taken some of the charge out of it.

Adapted from "[How to Overcome Communication Fears](#)" by JD Schramm.

Make Communication About Them, Not You

When having a difficult conversation, it's easy to get wrapped up in what you need. You're angry so you respond with anger. You're frustrated so you respond with frustration. It makes sense, but it's not effective. Instead of reacting, ask yourself a question: what is going on for the other party? Then, ask yourself another: what can I do or say to help? By focusing on the other person's needs, you can avoid unproductive emotions and find ways to support your employees and colleagues. While this may be the last thing you want to do in that moment, it's a much more effective way of getting your needs met.

Adapted from "[A Simple Communication Mistake to Avoid](#)" by Peter Bregman.

Three Ways to Avoid Communication Breakdowns

Even though communication is the lifeblood of an organization, it's difficult to find a company that doesn't have its momentary breakdowns in that area. Part of a manager's job is to keep these to a minimum. Here are three ways to ensure employees understand and communicate well:

Provide context. For people to understand a message, they have to know why it's important. Give people enough information so they know where things fall on the priority list.

Encourage questions. Don't just ask if people have questions, encourage them to raise concerns. This type of interaction helps people absorb information and understand messages so they can pass them on.

Stay connected. People respond to communications very differently, even when they're hearing the same information. By being in tune with your employees, you can anticipate their reactions and better understand how to deliver messages.

Adapted from "Your Communications May Not Be Communicating" by Ron Ashkenas.

Three Tips for Surviving Difficult Conversations

No one is immune to workplace tensions: It is inevitable that you will have some trying conversations with colleagues or clients. Here are three ways to reach a productive outcome, no matter how tough things get:

Keep it civil. Don't turn the conversation into a combat with a winner and a loser. Everyone looks bad when the discussion turns toxic.

Don't rehearse. When you know things are going to be tough, it's tempting to practice what you're going to say ahead of time. But this is a conversation — not a performance. Instead, know where you stand but be open enough to listen and react.

Resist making assumptions. You don't have access to anyone's intentions but your own. Don't assume that you know where your counterpart is coming from or how she views the problem. Instead, ask for her perspective.

Adapted from "Difficult Conversations: Nine Common Mistakes" by Holly Weeks.