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“HAVING A NECESSARY CONVERSATION”

Many people are avoiding a necessary conversation that is needed with someone at work. The reason that people avoid necessary conversations is the fear of the other person's reaction or retaliatory behavior. When people get to the point that they have clarity about needing to have a conversation, they may then procrastinate due to not knowing exactly how to approach the situation without creating more problems.

Here is a process to initiate a successful conversation that will help clear the air and get the issue resolved with a minimum of discomfort for either person:

Get in touch with your own feelings about what it is about the other person's behavior that is affecting you. Identifying this will help to put some distance and objectivity into the situation. The more calm, grounded and non-judgmental you can be, the greater the likelihood that you can set the stage for a positive and productive conversation.

Let the person know in advance that you have an important issue that you need to discuss. This will give them the courtesy of notice and also let them know that the issue is serious. Do not allow yourself to get pulled into the discussion at that time. "Jorge, I'm concerned about your last two month's sales deficiencies, and I wanted to give you a head's up that we need to talk about it. Can we take a moment to schedule some time today or tomorrow?"

Create a quiet and comfortable setting for the meeting. Put yourself in a "Do not disturb" mode: forward the phone to voice mail, turn the cell phone off, and closed the office door. The intent is not to intimidate the other person, but rather to create a safe space to clear the air and find a solution to the problem. Clear your mind of pre-conceived notions and judgments, which may have been based on incorrect assumptions.

Start by respectfully stating your concerns, and acknowledging your part in contributing to the situation. "Jorge, as I mentioned earlier, I have some concerns about your sales performance for the past two months. I realize that I assigned you to a challenging territory. However, we still were expecting to see a stronger performance from you." Proceed to be specific as to what the deficiencies or unacceptable behaviors were, as well as the impact to you, their customers or co-workers, or the organization.

Let the other person respond fully and without any interruptions from you. It is important that you listen and give the benefit of your full attention without judgment, so that the person feels they are being given a fair chance to be heard. If you do not agree with some of the points being made, save your responses until they have had their say. Then proceed to offer your point of view, continuing the exchange until there is agreement between you.

Before adjourning, restate what was agreed to - what you will do, and what you need from the other person. If appropriate, set a date at which the situation will be reviewed again for improvement. If the situation is performance-related, follow up with a memo of understanding, confirming the points agreed upon and the expected standards going forward. Thank them for their willingness to make a positive change, and offer your personal support toward their success.

(Adapted for the author's column, previously published in the Syracuse Newspapers)