

Management and Performance Associates – June 2015

Difficult Conversations. To whom?

Some of the most critical managerial tasks involve conversations about performance recovery, aligning expectations, dealing with frustrations, and letting an employee go.

These are difficult conversations due to the negative content involved. The difficulty begins even before the actual conversation though, it begins with identifying the need to conduct the conversation.

This article offers tips about two of these conversations: recovering performance and aligning expectations.

Performance Recovery

Part of the daily tasks of any manager is diagnosing the needs to adjust performance of their employees. The starting point is always to map the difficulties that prevent an employee to fully performing.

Pragmatically, we can say that performance is the combination of the conceptual knowledge to perform the work, the necessary skills to execute the task, the attitude toward the task and the attitude toward the people.

Dealing with knowledge and skills is relatively easy. Start with feedback (see last month's issue) and then look for options to increase that knowledge (observations, training, guidance, etc) and to develop skills (training, coaching etc).

When the performance problem is related to attitude, the conversation should start with providing feedback about the observed behavior. The problem will be solved faster if the employee, now aware of the need to adjust his or her attitude, displays openness to a coaching or counseling process.

The conversation becomes difficult when the employee is not open to change or starts an endless process of justification and blame—demonstrating

zero accountability. In these situations the conversation should focus on the consequences of not making the necessary adjustments to meet performance expectations. An effective coaching process might ensue if the employee realizes that the consequences are undesirable.

If the employee does not see the consequences as important enough to be dealt with, then the manager may start a formal recovery performance process which might end with letting the employee go, depending on local regulations and human resources policies.

The most important outcome of this situation is that the employee becomes aware of the consequences and that the possibility of reversing the situation is in his or her hands. During this process, managers must offer constant performance feedback, search for the reasons that prevent this employee from making the behavioral adjustments, discuss the lack of motivation to change and map activities or functions where the employee could be motivated to perform. If managers follow the above recommendations, and end up letting the employee go, he or she should not be surprised and managers will be sure that they did all that could have been done.

Letting an employee go cannot be your first response. If it is your final response, after the above efforts, then it is a legitimate managerial action.

Aligning expectations

The frustration caused by unmet expectations is the shortest way to de-motivation. Possible reasons for unmet expectations include lack of opportunity within the company, limited possibility of transfer to another location and external crises impacting day to day activities. The previous examples do not give the manager much latitude to act, except for conducting candid conversations where the employee is kept informed of the difficulties, the

importance of keeping up with his or her commitment as well as their deliverables.

The conversation becomes difficult when the employee has developed false career expectations. When facing this situation, it's safe to infer that the employee has had few or no conversations with his or her manager about career opportunities. Unfortunately, some managers avoid this kind of conversation. Among the reasons for doing so, they believe that the only focus of their relationship should be on short term deliverables, and that business goals are more important than long term staff members' aspirations.

Worse, some managers are actually responsible for generating the false expectations. They do so by praising without concrete results or by making unrealistic promises in order to obtain engagement on the spot. They also don't provide quality feedback on behavioral competencies (because financial goals are being met), etc. As a consequence, the staff member builds a false self-image creating a house of cards about future career options.

Most of the time, staff members' false expectations about career and current performance have their current or past manager's fingerprints all over them.

Although difficult, managers must conduct these conversations in order to align expectations. It can be enlightening, as the employee increases his or her awareness when receiving feedback, and as a consequence will re-assess his or her aspirations in a more realistic way, elaborating a more realistic action plan.

To answer the questions posed at the title of this newsletter, it is difficult for both parties – manager and staff member, for different reasons. But it is the manager's primary responsibility to take the initiative and schedule the conversation.

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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