

Ignite Newsletter August 2008

Challenging Conversations - Avoid? Engage?

Whether the topic is delivering a difficult message, giving tough performance feedback, or confronting insensitive behavior, most managers feel some reluctance when faced with having challenging conversations according to Eryn Kalish and Pat Zigarmi, coauthors of The Ken Blanchard Companies new Challenging Conversations training program.

While this feeling of reluctance is normal, managers have to be on guard that it doesn't lead to a managerial behavior that Kalish describes as "avoidance syndrome." When this happens, a manager will shut down or withdraw from a situation instead of confronting it directly. While this strategy may keep the lid on a situation in the short term, the long-term damage is usually substantial with drops in productivity and morale due to ongoing conflict and disagreement.

As Pat Zigarmi explains, "When managers avoid a sticky situation, it usually escalates. It gets stickier and messier and more complex. Also, emotions build. Both parties can feel guilty, threatened, and resentful."

The result is damaged relationships and damaged projects, says Kalish.

"The issue becomes a crisis, and decisions are then made with very incomplete information. So the wisdom gets lost because people are then so triggered that you're dealing with the situation at a time when everybody is really overheated and really upset. When decisions get made from a survival mentality, they are not the best decisions."

Zigarmi believes that the fast-paced demands of today's workplace make it increasingly important for managers to be able to effectively address sensitive subjects in the workplace. As she explains, "The longer the situation is left alone, the more both parties look for clues to prove their perceptions, to make themselves right. That only makes the conflict more challenging."

Why Managers Avoid Challenging Conversations

Considering the importance of successfully addressing sensitive issues in the workplace, why do some managers choose avoidance as a strategy when faced with a challenging situation? While avoidance may be an appropriate course of action in some select cases, more often it is a managerial default position because the skills, or will, are not there to have the conversation that is needed.

As Kalish explains, "People are concerned that they will do more damage to the relationship or to the project by addressing it openly. Because they feel that they lack the skills to manage the process successfully, managers often choose to avoid the problem and hope it clears up on its own."

Kalish believes that this can be traced back to a managers' past experience with conflict.

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"Many people grow up learning how to deal with conflict at home, school, and the workplace, which often teaches us some form of either fight or flight. Neither fight or flight really works when you're trying to have a challenging conversation. You want to be able to be centered and state your deep truth, and also listen to the other person's deep truth."

Stepping Up to the Challenge

To help managers improve their skills in dealing with challenging conversations, Kalish and Zigarmi teach participants how to speak up without alienating the other person and how to listen even if they are "triggered" by what they are hearing.

The concepts are easily understandable explains Kalish. "But it is something that's challenging emotionally to practice and get beyond our learned mindset. There is a five-step model in our training about stating your concerns directly, probing for more information from the other person, engaging people by really listening with your full heart, attending to the body language, watching for cues, tuning in at a subtler level, and also keeping forward focused when that is appropriate."

One of the greatest skills managers walk away with from the program, according to Zigarmi, is how to listen well—to listen to themselves and their instincts about difficult situations and to the other person in order to really understand their point of view and perspective.

For managers willing to step up to the challenge, the results can be far-reaching including quicker resolution of performance issues, better work relationships, fewer grievances, reduced tension and fewer corporate crises.

In her work with organizations, Kalish has even seen positive results in more extreme situations where people were so upset with the workplace conflict that they were ready to sue their employer.

"They walk out of class knowing that there are many steps between where they are and bringing a lawsuit and that there is a lot that they can do to address the situation," she explains, "so people feel more empowered and more excited. We are living in really challenging times in many ways, and the more masterful we can be at challenging conversations the better our workplaces, our families, and our society will be."

While it can seem daunting at first, Kalish and Zigarmi believe that the alternative is far more daunting and that it is well worth learning how to effectively engage in challenging conversations.

"It's way less stressful to know that you have the skills to have a challenging conversation," concludes Kalish, "than it is to think that your only alternative is to be miserable, or to quit, stewing on all the negative responses."

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