

Productivity Update

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3 Steps to Prepare for a Difficult Conversation

A one-on-one talk with the boss can be scary. Whether it is a performance review or a discussion of troublesome behavior, the words, “When you have a minute, let’s get together in my office” can strike deep anxiety in the heart of the bravest employee, which can set up a negative dynamic that is hard to overcome. To avoid setting a negative tone when you have to have a difficult conversation with a subordinate, consider these three steps.

Step 1. State the Reason for the Meeting or Conversation Up Front

For a lot of people, “assume the worst” is an operational mantra. Some say that we inherited this tendency to assume the worst from our ancestors, who were well-advised to treat strangers as threatening until proven otherwise.

It’s also reasonable to think that if a proposed meeting with the boss is good news, then he or she will say so in the invitation: “You did a really good job exceeding last month’s goal. Let’s get together and talk about how you plan to do that again this month.”

From time to time, you will have to talk with a subordinate because of something he or she did that caused a problem. It can feel uncomfortable to be the bearer of bad news. In order to avoid sending a negative signal, it may seem better to just briefly say, “Let’s get together after lunch.” Not saying what the meeting is about, however, does just the opposite. When people hear nothing that indicates the meeting or conversation is going to be good news, most will automatically assume that it will be bad news.

Avoid making your subordinates sweat for no reason. Say what the conversation is going to be about when you schedule it. In your invitation, focus on a positive outcome for the meeting rather than on the presenting problem. For example, instead of saying, “We need to talk about why you can’t get along with Harry,” try saying something like, “Let’s get together and talk about a way to avoid misunderstandings with Harry.”

Step 2. Assume the Best

Managing your assumptions about the person and about the conversation’s outcome is one of the most effective ways to achieve a positive resolution. A good strategy for a conversation with a difficult topic is to focus on the problem (not on the person) and on finding a positive resolution.

Assume that the person is acting from good intentions. Most people do the best they can, given their strengths and their burdens. Operating from the assumption that the person's *intentions* are good (in spite of his or her behavior) makes it easier to help the person avoid defensiveness and find a way to accept responsibility for his or her contribution to the problem. As the Japanese say, "Fix the problem, not the blame."

Assume that the conversation is going to have a positive outcome. Think about what that positive outcome might look like. Having an idea of the outcome that you want can help you find ways to shape the conversation so that it leads to that outcome. In addition, the expectation of a positive result will show in your body language and tone of voice.

On the other hand, if you assume that things will go poorly you are already well on the way to unintentionally fulfilling that negative prophecy.

Step 3. Be Aware of the Power Difference

It's easy to lose sight of the power difference between you and the people who work for you. The emphasis on teamwork in today's workplace makes it easy to forget that a power difference still exists. It is especially difficult to remember if you're on the high side of the power difference.

However, it is always top-of-mind to your subordinates. This is because of the reality that the power difference gives you more authority over subordinates than they have over you. So, as much as you may prefer to think that you are all just one big team, your employee's awareness of the power difference isn't going away. Keeping this in mind is the best way to avoid unknowingly sliding into the abuse of that power.

One More Thing: Take Your Own Temperature

Before initiating a difficult conversation, check your mood. Are you feeling patient, able to listen and maintain calmness, able to be objective? If so, good. But if you are feeling impatient, rushed, or angry – whether it has anything to do with the upcoming conversation or not – better for everyone if you hold off until you get to a better frame of mind.

You will know you handled a difficult conversation well if, when others ask the person how things went, he or she tells them, "It was a really good meeting. The boss helped me see what went wrong and how I could do better. This is the kind of person I like to work for."