

By Calvin Sun

It's the conversation every manager or supervisor dreads: Talking to a subordinate whom co-workers have complained about. Regardless of whether the issue is punctuality, work ethic, or worst of all, hygiene, the conversation poses a challenge. Here are some tips that might make the process easier and more effective.

1 Address the matter as soon as possible

In a previous article, I discussed the idea that subordinates should take initiative, rather than wait for assignments or direction from the boss. Here, the same concept applies, but in reverse: If possible, don't wait for your staff members to complain to you. If you see an issue, deal with it as soon as possible. Doing so can resolve the issue more quickly, and more important, it can make a good impression on your staff. Even if you never say anything explicitly about it (and you probably shouldn't), word will get out via the grapevine, and your team will appreciate it -- and you.

2 Set a specific time and place

Have you ever seen a minister, judge, or ship's captain come up to a couple on the spur of the moment, begin chatting casually with them and while doing so say, "Oh, by the way, you're now married"? Of course not. The ceremony could be elaborate, or it could be simple, but there *is* a ceremony nonetheless. People know when and where to be, and what will be happening.

Use this same approach yourself. Don't bring up the topic by surprise, in the middle of a casual conversation about the weather, or even during a regular business discussion. Instead, alert the person first by saying, "I've got something important I need to discuss. Can we get together at 10:00?" You've now set an expectation and have increased the chances that your later conversation will be effective.

3 Sit, don't stand

Many aspects of etiquette have military underpinnings. For example, shaking hands shows the other person that you're not holding a weapon. Allowing another person to proceed before you saves you in the event of an ambush. Rising to your feet when a person enters the room allows you to begin fighting more easily.

This latter distinction between standing and sitting is important when having the conversation. If you're both sitting down during the conversation, there's less chance that tension will arise.

4 Keep in mind the location

Regardless of the specific location, privacy is important. You don't want others to hear what's going on, so that the subordinate is embarrassed. Beyond that, you have three options for location: your office, the subordinate's office, or a neutral site. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Your office provides the greatest degree of control but could be intimidating. The subordinate's office may be less intimidating but might give the impression that you're encroaching on his or her turf. A neutral location, such as a cafeteria, might have fewer options for privacy but might make the subordinate feel more at ease.

Regardless of where you meet, think about where you sit with respect to the subordinate. Maybe you want to be behind your desk. On the other hand, maybe you want both of you to be on the same side of the desk or table. The latter option sends a message that you're both on the same side and can be less confrontational.

5 Focus on the issue, not the person

The chances of an effective conversation are increased if, instead of focusing on the person, you focus on the issue. For example, the statement, "Your lateness is affecting the project" focuses on the person, while, "Punctuality is important to keep the project on schedule" focuses on the issue and is less likely to make someone defensive or hostile.

6 Be specific about the concern

Being specific gives your comments more credibility. For example, noting specific instances of lateness will carry more weight than a general statement about the importance of being on time or about the subordinate's lateness. In particular, be specific regarding time and date (Monday, March 3: 15 minutes late); place (late for meeting in conference room 1); and person (John was unable to give a full presentation).

7 Be collaborative

In teaching customer service skills, I tell my clients to move the conversation into "collaborative" mode as quickly as they can. By doing so, the focus switches from "customer vs. service provider" to "customer and service provider vs. the problem". Tension is reduced as the two join forces to fight the common enemy.

This same approach can work when talking to an employee. If you can change the focus of the conversation so that you're dealing with the problem together, it will be less stressful and embarrassing for both of you. In the case of the tardy subordinate, for example, think about brainstorming ideas on why the tardiness is occurring and how to overcome it.

8 Avoid negative statements

I have found (and tell my clients) that negative statements are more likely to be misunderstood than positive ones -- and worse, they send the wrong message. Try to state your concerns positively rather than negatively. Instead of saying, "The project can't go smoothly if you don't come in on time," consider, "For the project to go smoothly, it's important to be punctual."

9 Encourage the subordinate

When the conversation is over, thank the subordinate for his or her time. Explain that you want him or her to succeed (as well you should, because that person's success can determine your own success). At the same time, say that you have high expectations and you hope the subordinate will live up to them. It's no guarantee, of course, but people tend to live up to or down to what others expect of them.

10 Document the meeting

After the meeting, document the discussions you had and any agreements or plans you worked on. Doing so provides a record and can be important if further measures are needed, including termination.

Having these conversations is rarely easy or pleasant. However, they are part of the manager's job. Following these tips may make the conversation more effective.

Calvin Sun consults with organizations in the areas of customer service, communications and leadership. You can reach him at csun@calvinsun.com.

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