Handling difficult feedback situations

Introduction

Daily pressure, complex relationships, personal problems and more all lead to stress and frustration that tends to come out during feedback discussions — which themselves can lead to tough emotional situations. What can you do as a manager?

Here, we’ll share guidelines for handling emotional feedback and then address several difficult redirection situations.

Key steps to handling emotional feedback

1. Don’t be afraid of emotions.

Understand that they are normal and try to remember that you’ve been there yourself. Allow for emotions and address them head-on. Before behavior change can occur, emotions should be clarified, acknowledged and then left to rest.

2. When emotions get overwhelming, take a break.

Sometimes people reach a point where they have difficulty dealing logically with a situation. Signs of this are aggressiveness, defensiveness, freezing like a “deer in the headlights” or crying. There are occasions when a bit of gentle humor can help ease the tension, but you as the manager must know your audience. Most likely, you should pause and say, “Let’s take some time to collect our thoughts and pick this up tomorrow.”

With these two guidelines in mind, let’s look at five difficult feedback situations and how you can handle each.

Key steps to handling different situations

1. Try to calm yourself as much as possible before initiating a feedback discussion.

What if you are emotionally charged about the behavior you want to give feedback on? This happens to all of us.

If you’re unable to calm down, try collecting your thoughts in writing before discussing them in person, or in extreme cases bringing in someone from HR to facilitate the feedback
discussion. If you start to lose control of your emotions, back down, wrap up the feedback session quickly and return to it the next day.

2. Try to draw out a response by staying silent, or actively engage the recipient if the person becomes uncommunicative when you initiate feedback.

Try asking, “What is your reaction?” You can also try to gently remind the person that this is a conversation and you need to understand what he or she is thinking. Make sure you're not doing anything with your facial expressions or physical gestures that the other person could find intimidating. And don't interrupt — that's a big one for this case. Listening means not speaking! Listen to the person’s response and react accordingly.

3. Hear out recipients who yell, cry or become overly defensive when presented with your feedback.

Of course, there are limits. You’re not required to be a doormat during a team member’s temper tantrum, but once the initial storm passes, you may be in a place where you can make great progress. Stay calm and acknowledge his or her emotional state. Thank the employee for being willing to explore the issue with you, and share that you know it can be a difficult process. The more supportive you can be, the more cooperation you’re likely to get.

4. Ask open-ended questions to feel out a feedback recipient’s personal problems.

What if a recipient is dealing with problems like health issues, relationship distress or financial trouble? The recipient is under stress and emotions will be running high. Sometimes, you may already know a bit about the circumstances, but may be unable to discuss it directly until the employee volunteers information.

In addition to asking open-ended questions, you can assure the employee, if you think it might help, that you’re not there to judge. It’s important for you to acknowledge that you understand he or she is under a lot of stress and emphasize that you only want to help that person perform his or her job through this difficult period.

5. Keep feedback about a team member’s personal habits short.

What if a team member's personal habits, like loud talking, gum chewing, or inappropriate clothing, are affecting your work? Simply state the issue in the most polite way you can and allow the other person to deal with it privately. Try to approach this situation and any
response sensitively. To minimize embarrassment, present the feedback as a situation that you noticed, and not something “everybody's been complaining about.”

Many of these situations can be severely uncomfortable. But by becoming more comfortable giving feedback, you can better equip yourself to handle difficult feedback sessions.

Next: How to overcome feedback nerves