



7 Tips for the Difficult Performance Discussion

Recently, one of the executives I coach came to me with a dilemma. She had to talk to one of her employees about performance which (a) she always found difficult and (b) found particularly difficult at this point because times are tough. Her fear was that, getting negative feedback from her might just be enough to push the stress level of her employee through the roof.

I asked her if the poor performance was making her happy. She of course said, “No.” I then asked her if the poor performance was making her employee happy. She shook her head and said, “No, he’s miserable too. But he doesn’t see it as his problem.” Given that he’s probably also not going to improve his performance if he doesn’t see it as his problem, I felt the only thing she could do was have the conversation.

What was also interesting about this interaction was that she was not planning on firing the employee...just giving him some serious and clear feedback. Of course the dilemma this creates is that eventually you may be forced to have the performance discussion you are avoiding but it may be at a point where the employee has no opportunity to correct or adjust their behavior. The only time to give critical feedback is now, so here are a few tips that you can follow to make your efforts more effective:

- 1. Take a break.** If you find yourself getting emotionally worked up about the discussion, take some personal time before the meeting and ask yourself, “What is it exactly that is causing this emotional response on my part?” If you are unclear on the exact nature of the problem, take the time to think it through before having the discussion.
- 2. Schedule uninterrupted time for the conversation.** No checking email, answering phone calls, or allowing other disturbances during this discussion. The meeting should be in your space, or at least in a space over which you have complete control.
- 3. Let the other person know the subject of the conversation ahead of time.** If it is a performance issue, tell them you want to discuss their performance. Difficult discussions become even more difficult when your employee is caught completely unaware.
- 4. Describe not only the problem, but the impact of the problem as you see it.** Be as specific as possible. If the issue is attitude, explain the impact of the attitude on the employee’s behavior and the impact on the behavior of others.
- 5. Look for guidance.** If you are the leader of a culturally diverse team, and the employee represents a significantly different culture than your own, seek advice from another leader who has experience in this situation. It is easy enough to be misinterpreted and your objective is to be crystal clear about the performance. Get HR advice if necessary.



6. Check perceptions. Ask the other person for their perception of the issue and give them the opportunity to share their perception without comment on your part. Silence can feel uncomfortable but let them work through the issues and explain how they see it.

7. Get their input. If there is an opportunity for mutual resolution of the issue, ask the employee what he or she thinks should happen next. Let them actively participate in the solution creation.

At the end of the discussion make sure you both agree on what actions are next, what results are expected, what the follow-up will be and what the consequences are. As difficult as these decisions can be, they will build your credibility and improve the effectiveness and morale of the team.



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