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Ask Jill
By Jill Kanter

Preparation: The Key to Constructive Feedback

Dear Jill,

I'm dealing with a sensitive issue with my administrative assistant. She delivers high quality work, but often arrives a little late to the office. I haven't said much, because it hasn't created any real problems, and I don't want to come across as heavy-handed. We come from two very different backgrounds and cultures, and I'm concerned that I might say the wrong thing. Do you have any thoughts on how I can address this?

Thanks,
Anne

Dear Anne,

Please know that you're in good company—even the most experienced managers can find it challenging to deliver constructive feedback. It's particularly important to focus on establishing good communication when diversity is involved, as there's greater likelihood for misunderstanding. I would encourage you to speak with your assistant, and the following questions might help you to prepare:

Identify the behavior targeted for feedback:

- How would you accurately describe the specific behavior that requires feedback?(who, what, when, where)

Describe the effect this behavior has on you and others:

- When the above behavior occurs, what is the specific consequence for you? Others?
- Can you describe the effects of the above behavior in a way that informs and educates the receiver (trying not to blame)?

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Identify your objective/desired outcome:

- What specific behavioral changes do you desire as a result of the feedback conversation?
- How can the relationship between you and the receiver be improved as a result of the feedback conversation? What specific interpersonal/relational changes are desired?

Developing your message:

- How can you begin your message in a way that prepares and opens the receiver to your feedback?
- What can you do during this discussion to ensure that when it ends, the receiver's self-esteem will remain intact or even be raised?

After you've prepared, schedule time to meet with your assistant. Remember to provide positive feedback before the constructive. You might begin by sharing how pleased you are with the quality of her work, and the difference that her contribution makes. It would be best for her to leave your meeting feeling highly valued, and motivated to address the performance issue identified.

I also recommend a wonderful resource for managers on diversity-related issues, *Workplace Diversity: A Manager's Guide to Solving Problems and Turning Diversity into a Competitive Advantage* by Katharine Esty, Richard Griffin, Marcie Schorr Hirsch.

Coaching Employee Development: Skills and Perspective

Dear Jill,

I'm a manager in a small company and one of my people is having problems with an employee in another group. He's had difficulty getting information from her and seems to take it personally. I've coached him with some success, but he's formed a grudge against this woman. Can you suggest how to deal with this? He has a lot of potential, and I want to help him to develop.

*Thanks,
Marsha*

Dear Marsha,

I want to commend you for focusing on your employee's development, as well as his performance. It sounds like you've coached him to work more effectively with his associate. Now you can provide perspective to help him see things in the most beneficial light. Below is an excerpt from a model I developed to help clients deal positively with people-related challenges. You might find it helpful, as you continue to coach his development.

Leverage the development opportunity inherent in every people-related challenge you encounter...

- Try to envision challenging people as actors portraying very specific roles custom-designed to assist your professional and personal development. This perspective enables you to step out of the stress and unpleasantness of emotional negativity, and into a kind of "oasis of objectivity." Seen as a beneficial growth opportunity, the difficult situation draws out your natural creativity and highest wisdom. Suddenly, you are at your very best in dealing with the challenging scenario.
- Maintain the perspective that no people-related challenge is too big or more than you can handle. Believe that you have what it takes to manage any situation in your path (keeping in mind that eventual outcomes may be different from your initial goals for situations). Remember also that no people-related challenge is ever too small for you, no matter how petty or trivial it may seem. Remain humble, and approach each new issue with as fresh and respectful a perspective as possible.

- Try to be compassionate with yourself as well as with others involved. (Any virtue you can bring to bear will most certainly serve you.) Remember that each of us has more to learn—that we are all very much “works in progress.”

Whether or not your employee is ready to release his grudge, he will most certainly benefit from your focus on his development. This kind of investment can go a long way!

If you have a question about a leadership or team issue in the workplace, please write to AskJill@womenandbiz.com.

Jill Kanter is a management consultant, speaker and writer with expertise in leadership development, team effectiveness and organizational change. She brings a strong practical approach and highly developed intuition to projects incorporating executive coaching, team development, workplace improvement and career empowerment.

Jill has worked extensively with clients in large, dynamic organizations in the financial services, hospital/healthcare, telecommunications and high-tech industries, as well as institutions of higher education and a variety of non-profits. She founded her firm in 1990, after earning her Ed.M. from Harvard University. You can reach Jill at 617-469-0100 or jdk@jillkanter.com. For more information about Jill Kanter, visit her website at www.jillkanter.com.

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