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HARD CONVERSATIONS MADE EASY

Having hard conversations is one of a supervisor's most important and most difficult responsibilities. Hard conversations are necessary when an employee's behavior is misaligned with the supervisor's expectations, is inconsistent with the organization's values or policies, does not meet performance expectations, or negatively impacts the team.

If a supervisor procrastinates having a difficult conversation, it may:

- precipitate the employee's failure
- cloud performance expectations
- lead employees to believe the undesirable behavior is permitted
- breed tension on the team
- create a perception of favoritism
- diminish respect for the supervisor

After reading this booklet, you will be able to:

- Craft conversations that influence behavior and build relationships
- Develop employees by delegating solutions
- Motivate employees to improve performance
- Earn respect by getting results
- Have a COACHing conversation

Results or Relationships?

Some supervisors feel it's easy to have hard conversations, while others find it difficult. Often, the difference is in the orientation. Some leaders are more results oriented while others are more relationships oriented. Results-oriented supervisors are more concerned with changing the employee's behavior than protecting their relationship with the employee; while relationships oriented supervisors are concerned with maintaining the relationship and may hesitate to have hard conversations.

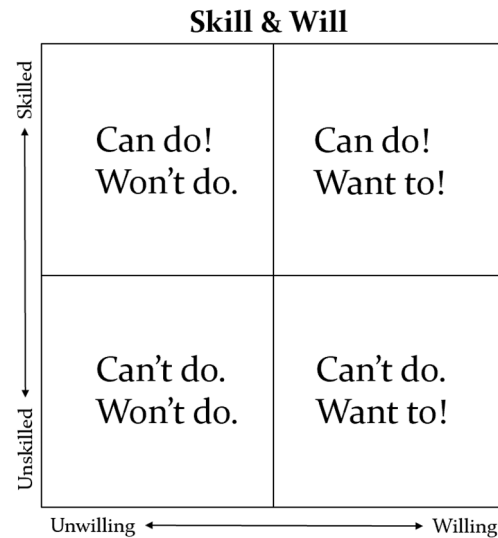
One orientation is no better than the other. Both have their advantages, and both are less effective at extremes. However, understanding your orientation is essential for crafting conversations that influence behavior and build relationships. You must first know which way you lean so you know what to emphasize when having a hard conversation.

Which way do you lean? Do you lean more to results or relationships? If you lean to results, you will want to express care and concern in your hard conversations to build the relationship. If you lean to relationships, you will want to use bold language that defines expectations and creates accountability to change the employee's behavior and achieve the desired results.

Skill or Will?

The second thing to consider is if the employee's behavior stems from lack of skill or lack of will. The Skill and Will Matrix divides combinations of skill and will into four quadrants.

Hard conversations go wrong when supervisors misdiagnose skill or will.



It is easiest to address lack of skill. You can train an employee who does not know how to perform to expectations. An employee who lacks will is more difficult to address. The employee may lack desire or feel doubt so the conversation will need to motivate the employee or help build the employee's confidence.

Hard conversations go wrong when supervisors misdiagnose skill or will. For example, if an employee lacks the skills to meet performance expectations, but the supervisor assumes the employee is unmotivated, the supervisor may attempt to motivate the employee without addressing the lack of skill. Conversely, a supervisor may offer training to a skilled employee who is unmotivated. Both scenarios fail to build relationships or achieve the desired results. Therefore, it is important to properly diagnose skill and will during a difficult conversation.

COACHing Conversation

The COACHing conversation turns hard conversations into easy conversations, effectively diagnoses skill and will and provides motivation if the employee lacks desire, and confidence if the employee is doubtful.

Supervisors most often use COACHing conversations to address minor issues that do not warrant formal disciplinary action. A COACHing conversation can be an informal conversation that happens on-the-spot in view of others or a more formal conversation that is scheduled and held behind closed doors.

Call attention to the behavior

Outline the impact and intent

Ask for an explanation

Consider solutions

Hold accountable

Here is an example of a COACHing conversation:

Call attention to the behavior

I understand you've fallen behind on the project and, on your current track, you won't finish before the deadline...

Outline the impact and intent

...which has required some of your team members to drop what they're working on to help you catch up. (impact) I know you want you to be successful on this team and I want you to be successful (intent) but you won't be if your teammates feel they can't depend on you.

Ask for an explanation

What's caused you to fall behind?
{LISTEN to their response.}

Consider solutions

What can you do to address your challenges and get this project back on

track?

{LISTEN to their response.}

Hold accountable

That sound like a good solution. Can I count on you to resolve these issues and finish the project on time and on budget?

{WAIT for their response.}

Thank you!

Benefits of a COACHing Conversation

Call attention to the behavior

The first step in the COACHing conversation is to *call attention to the behavior*. This is stating specifically what the person did or said. This ensures the focus of the conversation is on the act, not the actor.

*Focus the conversation on
the act, not the actor.*

For example, if someone is late for work, a supervisor could say, "This morning you were 20 minutes late for work." Or the supervisor could say, "It seems that you're not a dependable employee." Which statement is better? The first statement is best because it states what the person did—the act. The second statement is about the person—the actor. "You are not dependable" is a statement about the person's character. This statement would likely cause the employee to become defensive. It also conveys the supervisor expects the employee to change the supervisor's perception of their character. That is hard to do. The purpose of the conversation is to change the employee's behavior, which is easier for the employee to do.

Outline the impact and intent

The next step in the COACHing conversation is to *outline the impact and intent*. The impact is the result of the employee's behavior. Explaining the impact illustrates for the employee that their actions are not in their best interest.

Declaring intent conveys the conversation is meant to help the employee. Stephen M. R. Covey, author of *The Speed of Trust*, explained people need to know only two things about you to know if they can trust you. 1) You are not a threat. 2) Your only motive is to help them succeed. You foster trust as you outline your intent.

Ask for an explanation

Supervisors sometimes jump to conclusions before learning the truth. Often, what they think happened did not happen, yet they approach the conversation assuming it did. Or they may be unaware of details that would change their perception of the circumstances. Therefore, it is important for supervisors to *ask for an explanation*.

This is important because it encourages a two-way conversation. It also conveys the supervisor gives the employee the benefit of the doubt and that the supervisor wants to consider the employee's point of view before passing judgement.

Additionally, asking for an explanation gives the supervisor the opportunity to assess if the behavior resulted from lack of skill or will. If the employee did not know what they were doing was wrong, that is lack of skill and is easily resolved with training. If the employee knew what they were doing was wrong and chose to do it anyway, that is lack of will and, in severe

cases, may need to be resolved with disciplinary action.

Consider solutions

Leaders are problem solvers. When they see a problem, they are often expected to bring to bear their skill and experience to solve it. However, in COACHing conversations, leaders are to leave problem-solving to the employee. This increases the employee's buy-in, commitment, and the likelihood the employee will resolve the issue.

In COACHing conversations, leaders are to leave problem-solving to the employee.

The supervisor should lead the employee to *consider solutions* by asking questions like "How will you resolve this?", "What will you do differently in the future?", "What else might work?", etc. Delegating problem-solving to the employee puts responsibility for resolving the problem on the shoulders of the one responsible for it.

Additionally, this authorizes the supervisor to hold the employee accountable for the results. If the supervisor dictates the solution, the supervisor may not be able to hold the employee accountable for the outcome. The employee can simply say, "I tried what you told me to do and it didn't work." But if the employee creates the solution, it was the employee's idea and the employee is responsible for its success. This can motivate the employee to ensure they resolve the issue and empowers them to be fully accountable for the results.

There are two exceptions. One is when the employee does not have sufficient skill to

resolve the problem. If the employee is unable to resolve the problem, the supervisor may help the employee craft a solution. The second is when the employee is belligerent and refuses to suggest solutions. In that case, the supervisor will need to define the employee's course of action in no uncertain terms.

Hold accountable

The last step in the model is *hold accountable*. In this step, the supervisor asks the employee to commit to resolving the issue. After the employee commits, the supervisor should thank the employee.

Hold accountable is an important step because it establishes a verbal contract between the supervisor and the employee. Should the employee demonstrate the desired behavior change, the supervisor can express appreciation for the employee's behavior and encourage the employee to continue to improve. Should the employee repeat the undesirable behavior, the supervisor can say, "You committed to me this would never happen again. You gave me your word. Your actions now call into question your integrity and leave me to wonder if I can trust you." The supervisor can now escalate the conversation to disciplinary action, if warranted.

Handling Objections

Ideally, the employee will acknowledge fault when the supervisor asks for an explanation of the behavior. But frequently, employees will deny it happened, defend their actions, or deflect blame to something or someone else. These are common defenses people employ when they feel cornered. At times, they may even become verbally combative. This is disconcerting for some supervisors.

Fortunately, there is phrase that effectively neutralizes most arguments and helps to steer

the conversation in the right direction. Regardless of the objection the employee offers, the supervisor can respond by saying, "That may be." This simple phrase acknowledges what the employee said without agreeing or disagreeing with the employee's assertion. The supervisor may repeat "that may be" as often as needed and then redirect the conversation.

Here is an example of handling objections in a COACHing conversation. In this scenario, the supervisor is addressing an employee's absenteeism. The supervisor has noticed a pattern of the employee calling in sick on Mondays and Fridays. The supervisor suspects the employee is fraudulently using sick leave to create three-day weekends. This employee is not a stellar employee but typically meets minimum expectations. The employee has had some minor altercations with coworkers and management.

Supervisor: {Call attention to the behavior} I noticed a pattern I'd like to discuss with you. The last three times you've taken sick leave have been in conjunction with a weekend. Now, people can get sick on any day of the week and, of course, we want employees who are unwell to stay home; however, you've taken sick leave on a Friday or Monday three different times in the last two months, which seems excessive.

{Outline the impact and intent} I know you want to be successful here, and I want you to succeed, but this pattern of behavior isn't helping you. It creates the perception that you may be fraudulently using sick leave. {Ask for an explanation} What's going on?

Employee: {defending} Well, that's none of your business. My health issues are private, and I don't have to explain them to you.

Supervisor: *That may be* and, if there is a medical issue that may cause you to frequently miss work, I would encourage you to talk with

HR about your eligibility for FMLA. But, as I understand, you have not applied for FMLA, but you have created this pattern of absenteeism in conjunction with weekends.

Employee: {deflecting} Last week Mark took a sick day on Friday. Are you talking to him too!?!

Supervisor: *That may be* and if we see a similar pattern of behavior with other employees we will talk with them. But right now we aren't talking about Mark, we're talking about you and your pattern of absenteeism. So, what's going on?

Employee: {denying} Nothing! Nothing is going on. I was sick so I stayed home.

Supervisor: *That may be*, and if that is the case, we want you to stay home, but the pattern is suspect. I want to give you the benefit of the doubt, but I need your help. {Consider solutions} What can you do differently in the future?

Employee: I guess I'll come to work sick and get everyone else sick.

Supervisor: Well, as I said, we want you to stay home if you're sick. What else could you do?

Employee: Do you want me to get a doctor's note or something?

Supervisor: That would be helpful. Would you be willing to get a doctor's note if you are sick on a workday that's adjacent to a scheduled day off?

Employee: It sounds like I don't have much of a choice.

Supervisor: {Hold accountable} Can I get your commitment that, moving forward, you will provide a doctor's note if you are requesting sick leave on a day that's adjacent to a scheduled day off?

Employee: I guess so.

Supervisor: Thank you.

Notice the supervisor frequently used "that may be" to minimize conflict and keep the conversation on track. The supervisor neither confirmed nor denied the employee's arguments, but simply redirected the conversation to the issue at hand.

Handling Unjust Accusations

Sometimes during a COACHing conversation, the employee will unjustly accuse the supervisor of unlawful behavior (e.g. harassment, bullying, etc.) or cite bias against protected characteristics (e.g. race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, etc.) to deflect the supervisor's attention away from the employee's actions. Some supervisors are unsure of how to respond to these accusations.

Seek help anytime an employee raises a concern related to unlawful behavior or protected characteristics.

Generally, the accusation is unfounded if the supervisor is addressing the act not the actor and has addressed similar acts in the same way with all other employees. The supervisor should take the accusation seriously, but it should not necessarily negate the conversation. For example, if a supervisor is having a COACHing conversation with an employee who says to the supervisor, "You are bullying me, and this is creating a hostile work environment." This is a serious accusation. However, the supervisor may continue the conversation. The supervisor could respond by saying, "Thank you for sharing that concern with me. That is a serious accusation. I will share your concern with HR after this conversation and would encourage

you to do the same so they can investigate, but right now we are discussing...”

Supervisors should seek help from HR or higher management anytime an employee raises a concern related to unlawful behavior or protected characteristics. If supervisors fail to do so, they could be personally liable for failing to act. By reporting the claim, supervisors fulfill their lawful duty to act and will receive additional guidance and support.

Documenting Conversations

We have all heard the adage, “If it ain’t documented, it didn’t happen.” Documentation can range from a handwritten note-to-self on a scrap of paper to a complex form reserved for disciplinary action. Most COACHing conversations do not need to be documented. Many happen on-the-spot and address minor issues that can be immediately corrected.

However, supervisors should document COACHing conversations in certain circumstances. Here are some circumstances when documentation is prudent:

- **Will not Skill** - the employee knowingly and willfully chose to behave contrary to standards, values, policies, expectations, etc.
- **Pattern of Behavior** – the supervisor expects the employee may develop a pattern of unwanted behavior
- **Indifference** – the employee does not demonstrate contrition and is resistant to changing the unacceptable behavior
- **Accusation** – the employee accuses the supervisor of unlawful or unethical conduct (e.g. discrimination, harassment, etc.)

Informal and Formal COACHing

As noted earlier, COACHing conversations are often informal conversations that happen on-the-spot and may occur in view of others. It is permissible to have COACHing conversations in view of others in these circumstances:

- **Reinforce Standards** – If others see an employee doing something wrong and the supervisor sees it and says nothing, the supervisor’s silence conveys the behavior is allowed. Silence is permission. In this case, it is better for the supervisor to pull the employee aside in view of others, so they see the supervisor reinforce the standard.
- **Informal Mentoring** – The supervisor sees an opportunity to give an employee some tips or tricks. Employees expect their supervisors to mentor them and appreciate supervisors who do so often.

Supervisors most often use the COACHing conversation for informal coaching, but they can also have COACHing conversations during formal disciplinary action (e.g. written verbal). In this case, the supervisor will follow the same steps in the COACHing conversation model but may be more directive during the *Consider solutions* step. Formal disciplinary action sometimes necessitates that the supervisor defines the expected course of action instead of the employee. The supervisor should document all formal disciplinary conversations.

Conclusion

Hard conversations are one of a supervisor’s most important and difficult activities. Hard conversations are easier when supervisors get results while building relationships, diagnose skill and will, and apply the COACHing Conversation model.