The Successful SUPERVISOR

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Tips from LifeSolutions

"I handle day-to-day communications with my staff very well. What I struggle with are the tough conversations . . . when I have to give negative feedback or assign a task to a person who doesn't want to do it. I get so anxious before these conversations, and I put them off for as long as I can. Then, when I do have them, they don't go well. I need help!"

Supervisors often face challenging conversations with their employees. These tough moments can be planned and reoccurring, such as performance evaluations, feedback on assignments, or managerial issues. But other times, tough conversations catch us off guard – you bring up an idea in a meeting and are surprised by the negative emotional response. In any situation, how you handle the conversation significantly affects the outcome. The next two Successful Supervisor newsletters *will focus on these types of "crucial conversations." As always, we are interested in your feedback and questions. Please email the EAP at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com or contact an EAP account manager at 1.800.647.3327.*

Debra Messer, MA, CEAP, LifeSolutions

In their book *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*, the authors define a crucial conversation as a discussion between two or more people where: (1) opinions vary, (2) the stakes are high, and (3) emotions run strong.

You are talking to an employee about a work issue and you both quickly come to agree about the issue at hand. This could be for a number of reasons — maybe it's not that important to either of you, maybe there is an easy solution you both agree with, or maybe neither of you has any emotional involvement in the issue. When this happens, you are not involved in a crucial conversation. *If only it were this simple all the time.* Now, let's say you ask your employee, Tim, to take on a project that *you* believe he needs to do. But let's say that Tim doesn't see it that way. Tim isn't interested in this task and believes it falls outside of his job description. **You have a difference of opinion**. Add to the mix that this is an important project and *you* will be judged on the outcome. Let's also assume that Tim is worried that this new project will take a great deal of time and add to what he already sees as a difficult workload. He wants to protect his time. **The stakes are high for both of you**. Tension mounts and emotions such as frustration, anxiety, fear, and anger permeate. **These are strong emotional responses.** You and Tim are engaged in a crucial conversation. As noted earlier, how you handle this conversation will significantly impact the outcome. *Crucial Conversations* authors Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler suggest that you have options. You can avoid dealing with the conversation by sending the assignment to Tim via email. You can talk to Tim in person and handle it unskillfully, leading to undesirable consequences. Or, you can talk to Tim in person and handle it well, leading to an outcome that works for everyone.

"I never thought about it like that. There really is a *lot* going on in that interaction. Is there more?"

There *is* more. Typically when we are faced with this kind of tough communication, we are not really operating at our best. We may shut down, back off, give up, get angry, yell, become authoritarian, or say things we later regret. Why is that? We certainly did not want it to end up that way.

According to the authors of *Crucial Conversations*:

- Your survival mechanisms can get in the way. You feel threatened, adrenaline kicks in, and you shift into fight or flight mode. Your heart starts pumping, blood rushes to your face, and you clench your fists. This happens automatically. You don't make it happen. Problem is, you are not thinking intelligently in that moment. You are reactive instead of responsive. And your employee may be going through the same experience. Not much chance for successful communication.
- You are operating under pressure. Maybe you didn't expect the response you are getting. You have to think on your feet. Remember, the stakes are high and you have strong feelings about this.
- You may be confused about the right approach. What *should* you say? What is the wisest course of action? You aren't prepared, so you make it up as you go along.
- You may default into self-defeating behaviors such as ending the discussion prematurely or giving the employee an ultimatum. Or you may mistake the employee's silence as acceptance, breathe a sigh of relief, and assume the issue is settled. Meanwhile you have a disengaged employee walking out of your office.

To steer the conversation toward a positive outcome, you want to:

- Stay calm, mindful, and attentive.
- Frame your message in a way that enables your employee to hear what you have to say without either one of you becoming defensive or upset.
- Provide a psychologically safe relationship where your employee can freely express his or her opinions, concerns, worries, and objections without fear of censure or reprisal**.**
- Recognize that the more the employee shares in the process, the more willing he or she will be to cooperate with the outcome**.**

Next month we will look more closely at strategies for managing difficult or crucial conversations. In the meantime, call *Life*Solutions at 1.800.647.3327, or your HR Representative, as appropriate, if you would like to learn more about the skillful management of tough communications.

Nothing in this information is a substitute for following your company policies related to information covered here.

This material is adapted from Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler, McGraw Hill Publishing, 2012.

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