The Successful SUPERVISOR

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Tips from LifeSolutions

As noted in the September issue of The Successful Supervisor, *managers and supervisors often face challenging conversations with their employees. Turning these "crucial conversations" into free-flowing and productive dialogues is challenging and requires thoughtful intention, commitment, and practice. This month's issue focuses on strategies you can use to get what you want out of the conversations you have with your staff. This material is adapted from "Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High" by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzler, McGraw Hill Publishing, 2012. As always, we are interested in your feedback and/or questions. Please email the EAP at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com or contact an EAP account manager at 1-800-647-3327.*

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The first step in learning how to manage a crucial conversation is **to stop believing that others are the source of the problem.** You are the only person you can effectively change, so it makes sense to work on improving your own approach. The best way to improve the outcome of your communications is to focus on yourself. The following dialogue principles and skills can help you coach yourself and others.

1. **Start with heart.** Begin with the right motives and stay focused on what you *really* want, no matter what. Some questions to ask yourself:
   - What do I really want for myself?
   - What do I really want for others?
   - What do I really want for this relationship?
   - How would I behave if I really wanted this … and what am I *acting* like I really want?
   - What do I not want to have happen and how do I avoid that?

2. **Learn to look.** Notice signals that a routine conversation is turning crucial. These signals include **physical cues** (tight stomach, increased heart rate), **emotional cues** (feeling scared, angry, threatened), or **behavioral cues** (raising your voice, pointing your finger, shutting down). Attend to safety and watch for signs that the other person is becoming fearful. For example, people typically become defensive, aggressive, or withdrawn when they no longer feel safe.

3. **Make the situation safe. Apologize** when appropriate. If you have made a mistake (e.g., you didn't include someone in a meeting), start with an apology that expresses your sadness for causing suffering for that person. **Contrast** to clear up a misunderstanding by addressing the person's concern and affirming your respect for them. For example, say, "The last thing I wanted to do was exclude you. I think it is critical that you have input on this project." Ask yourself why has it become unsafe here? Do we have mutual purpose? Am I being respectful? What can I do to rebuild safety?

4. **Stay in dialogue even when you are angry, scared, or hurt.** How many of you have ever said, "He really makes me mad!"? Well, no matter how good it might make you feel to say that, others cannot make you mad. *You* make you mad. Once you have made yourself mad you can choose to either act on your emotions or be acted on by them. You master them or they master you. There is, however, a middle step in the process. Just after we observe someone's behavior and just before we feel our emotion, **we tell ourselves a story**. We guess what the person's motives were and add judgments. Based on our story, we respond with an emotion. So, retrace the path by:
   - Noticing what you are doing: How am I behaving?
   - Get in touch with your feelings: What emotions are leading me to act this way?
   - Analyze your stories: What story am I telling myself that is leading to this emotion?
   - Get back to facts: What evidence do I have to support this story?

5. **STATE Your Path**
   - **S**hare your facts
   - **T**ell your story
   - **A**sk for others' paths
   - **T**alk tentatively
   - **E**ncourage testing

6. **Explore Others' Paths**
   - Ask
   - Mirror
   - Paraphrase
   - Prime (float a hypothesis: "Are you worried that this is going to really bog down the system?"

7. **Move to Action**
   - Decide how to decide
   - Document decisions and how to follow up

If you practice these principles and skills, you may not always be successful. If the other person is not willing to engage in a meaningful dialogue with you, you may not get the outcome you are seeking. If you continue practicing, however, your workers will almost always join with you.

If you have any questions about managing crucial conversations, please feel free to contact your EAP Consultant or your HR Consultant.

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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