Seek First to Understand: Difficult Conversations that Lead to Connection

We’ve all had them. Difficult conversations in the workplace. They can be awkward or even unpleasant, but these conversations are inevitable and important in any workplace dynamic. This is more relevant today with all that’s happening in the world and the workplace (employees dealing with pandemic-related grief; conflicts surrounding inequality and discrimination; and other crises that have frayed nerves and opened new and old wounds). Managers and supervisors play a key role in handling these conversations with their employees.

“Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” In Stephen Covey’s well-known book, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Covey explains this concept: Seek first to understand means staying quiet and listening. Let the other person explain their point of view before you speak. Seek to understand their point of view first. Understanding does not mean agreement. Simply listen and understand. You don’t necessarily have to agree with what the other person is saying.

Only then, seek to be understood. Now that you have listened to the other person and they feel that you understand them, you can begin sharing your point of view. You can seek to be understood, but know you don’t have to convince the other person that you are “right.”

Discussing race and discrimination in the workplace

Increasing empathy, psychological safety and taking the time to address race issues will help bridge current race-based disconnects in the workplace. When facilitating open and honest dialogue, emphasize that the purpose of getting together is to discuss, not to debate or disagree. Treat open discussions about race similar to discussions about job performance. This means avoiding blame or attribution. Focus only on behaviors. In today’s climate, more and more organizations are taking proactive steps to eradicate racial discrimination in their work environment. The goal is zero tolerance for racism.

For assistance, please contact Advocate Aurora Employee Assistance Program:
800-236-3231

Sometimes the most important conversations are the most difficult to engage in.

~Jeanne Phillips quote
Can we avoid workplace conflict?

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) states that conflict is inevitable whenever employees of various ages, backgrounds and different working styles are brought together in the workplace. Conflict can be expressed as insults, non-cooperation, bullying and anger.

The negative effects of workplace conflicts include increased stress, work disruptions, decreased productivity, absenteeism, turnover and termination. Tensions and anxieties seem to be at an all-time high due to the current political divide and racial inequality discussions spilling over into the workplace. SHRM suggests that effectively handling workplace conflicts and difficult conversations starts with maintaining a workplace culture focused on strong employee relations based on fairness, trust and mutual respect at all levels of the organization.

Having difficult conversations may never be easy for leaders. You can, however, take steps to make those conversations as productive as possible. Difficult conversations that are handled well become valuable learning tools for all. Open dialog can help build deeper connections and understanding of both ourselves and others.

Top tips for having difficult conversations

- **Don't avoid it.** Difficult conversations can become more difficult the longer you delay.
- **Have a stated purpose.** What do you want to get out of this conversation?
- **Plan out the conversation.** Have some notes, but don't script the conversation.
- **Be confident, direct and specific.**
- **Be empathetic and open to the other person’s perspective.**
- **Use “I” statements.**
- **Observe body language.** Observing someone’s body language can tell you what the other person is really feeling and saying.
- **Stick to the facts.** Manage your own emotions during the conversation.
- **Provide constructive feedback.** Provide feedback to employees routinely. Try to address issues as soon as they arise.
- **Allow the other person to ask questions.**

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