

Talking to Employees About Sensitive Subjects

As a manager, there may be times when you need to talk to an employee about a subject that may be uncomfortable for both of you. Perhaps it's awkward because you have no experience with the issue. The subject may be embarrassing or feel very personal. You may not know how to frame the conversation or feel at a loss for words. Avoiding the issue may mean it grows and affects relationships and productivity. The goal is a respectful conversation that spells out solutions and allows both of you to walk away with a sense of dignity.

What is a “sensitive subject”?

A “sensitive subject” is usually a personal characteristic or behavior that makes the person stand out in some way. It can be a characteristic of their personality or a behavior unique to them. It can be how an individual smells or clothing that has not been laundered. It may be a habit that others define as “odd.” Common examples include bothersome odor and inappropriate attire, language or behavior.

The characteristic or behavior is such that it affects relations with coworkers, supervisors, customers and/or subordinates. It consequently has an indirect effect on work performance and therefore needs to be addressed. The employee is often unaware of the issue and how it is affecting his or her standing amongst coworkers.

Ineffective responses

Approaches that involve vague or “soft” attempts at communication, with the intent of being sensitive or polite, are typically ineffective and rarely accomplish the necessary goal of making the employee aware that something needs to be changed. Examples include:

- Taking no action (while harboring ill feelings and thoughts about the employee).
- Indirect hints: “I find that the showers in the workout room are really handy...”
- Directing a message meant for one employee to the entire team: “Everyone needs to make sure they are coming to work in proper attire.”

- Avoiding and wishful thinking. “He must see how others react to him. I’m sure he’ll figure it out.”
- Talking about the issue to everyone but the person with the issue.

These are some common, very human, but ineffective ways a manager might deal with a difficult topic. Direct communication is necessary. You will need to clearly state the problem and be objective and factual.

Focusing on solutions

To begin, accurately assess the issue by getting the facts. Keep in mind that it is the negative impact on the workplace that makes this a performance issue. Focus on getting answers to the following questions:

- **Who** is the problem?
- **What** are they doing? What specifically does the employee do that is most problematic?
- **For whom** is this a problem? Who is affected – coworkers, customers, subordinates, others?
- **How** is it a problem? What is the impact of the issue? How does it interfere or prevent the employee or others from doing their jobs?

When you have the answers, you can begin putting together your plan of action.

First steps

Look at what you've tried so far. If it's not working, be ready to give up that approach and move on to something new.

Review related policies, such as dress codes. Citing a policy is a good way to be clear and sidestep the discomfort.

Consider a conversation. A frank talk is often the most effective approach. Planning what you'll say and how you'll say it can help you go into a conversation with confidence.

The prep

Before you meet to talk, be clear on the following:

What do you want to accomplish? Perhaps just awareness, with a follow-up meeting to discuss solutions. Be clear about your goals.

How will you approach the topic? Think about what you will say, how the person may respond, and how you will respond back. Note what makes you uncomfortable and consider how you'll bring up those issues.

How do you want to say it? Think about your tone and attitude. The goal is to treat the person with dignity.

The discussion

- Protect the employee's privacy.
- Use a non-accusatory approach; assume that the employee is unaware of the problem.
- Maintain sincerity and good eye contact.
- Start with positives and strengths about the employee.
- You can take the approach that you want the employee to be successful, therefore, you're bringing up an issue that can be hard to talk about, but it is important that it's addressed.
- Describe the issue; stick to facts only. Stay away from speculating about causes or intentions—there may be legal issues under Americans with Disabilities Act and non-discrimination laws. Avoid a judgmental tone.
- Explain how it is affecting others, productivity and the functioning of the unit or team – again, stick to facts. Point out company policy guidelines if applicable.
- Be respectful; listen quietly while they respond. The person may or may not have a response. They may be in shock about the feedback.

- Do not ask directly about the cause of the issue. Use open-ended questions to guide your understanding.
- Move to problem-solving mode and ask them to suggest solutions. Getting their buy-in can make a difference in changing behavior. You might say, "We have a problem. I hope you can help me solve it."
- If they don't come up with a solution, give suggestions in question format: "Have you tried...?" "Have you considered...?" Be aware that some issues may have an underlying medical cause, e.g., body odor. Be sure to consult with your HR department for advice on avoiding discriminatory statements or actions.
- If the employee rejects all suggestions, you may wish to suggest the EAP as a problem-solving resource.
- Conclude the meeting with a clear statement of the expected outcome. Don't assume the employee knows what the next step is – be specific.
- Discuss both formal and informal consequences for failure to change behavior.
- Give a time frame and set a follow-up meeting to review progress.
- Follow your organization's progressive discipline policy, if applicable, if behavior does not change.

Going forward

Be aware and prepared to notice indicators of change. Ask yourself: What would be a small initial indicator that things are beginning to get better – not completely resolved but starting to improve?

Appreciate noticeable progress and give that feedback to employee right away to reinforce progress.

Remember that the EAP is always available to you for consultations on specific issues.

Keep in mind

While your role in the discussion is one of "supporter," it is also that of "manager." Use your documentation and the validity of the facts throughout the conversation. Use policies and procedures to reinforce expected behavior and the seriousness of violations. Do not debate, argue or concede. While such conversations are often difficult, they are necessary to maintain a positive and productive workplace.