Handling awkward employee conversations

If you lead people, there may come a time where you have to address a problem you would rather avoid. And while it can be a challenge to deal with "big" issues like a death, harassment or an addiction, sometimes it's the "little" problems that are the hardest to handle because there's no real protocol and they somehow seem more personal. From unacceptable hygiene and inappropriate outfits to obnoxious behaviours, no manager wants handle this kind of painfully awkward and uncomfortable scenario with a worker. But whether another employee complains to you or you notice it yourself, sometimes there's no avoiding it: the conversation has to happen. Leave the problem unaddressed and it may start to impact the mood, morale and even productivity of your entire team.

Easy Does It: Tips to Broach a Tough Subject

Thankfully, there are ways to handle these delicate situations just a bit more gracefully. To help make these tough talks a little easier, make sure you:

Don't ignore the problem. If you've received complaints from your team about an issue, you owe it your worker to talk to him or her yourself. Know that this is a touchy subject and if you don't address it immediately, one of your employees may and chances are they won't be as kind. This can create a whole slew of problems for you including a hostile work environment or legal concerns.

Stay sensitive. Realize this discussion is not only embarrassing and uncomfortable *for you* but for your employee too**.** Ease in to the topic to give the worker a bit of a heads up. Begin by saying, "I know that this is a difficult topic…," or, "I don't want to cause you any embarrassment…," or, "I'm uncomfortable discussing this but…," so you don't come across as if you're criticizing the employee. Just remember that issues like body odour may be related to cultural differences or a medical condition so keep this in mind and tread lightly.

Shoot straight. Avoid beating around the bush and tell the employee exactly what the problem is. You have to be clear about what you want to change or happen and always approach this type of subject one-on-one. You may be tempted to hold a meeting where you mention that "some" of your employees are doing the following, or decide to host a workshop on office- appropriate attire—DON'T! Chances are the person doesn't realize there's a problem, so don't expect the employee to read between the lines.

Stress the consequences. Depending on the issue, the employee may not understand why their behaviour is any concern of yours. If possible, frame it as a business issue rather than a personal one. Explain how sloppy attire can start to affect the company's image or how their personal hygiene has sparked complaints from clients. This makes the conversation less of a personal attack and more about your bottom line as a company.

Avoid passing the buck. As a manager, you're directly responsible for providing feedback to your staff. Don't dodge the bullet by saying you're only mentioning this because of complaints you've received from colleagues. This will make the employee feel like the whole department has been gossiping and will likely push them into defense mode. Take the responsibility and tell your employee this is a problem *you* have noticed and are concerned about. If they refuse to believe you, then you can mention employee or client complaints.

Offer help. One of the best ways you can help your employee deal with a bad habit or behavioural issue is to help them work towards a solution. They may be willing to participate in a related workshop or be open to certain accommodations to help deal with the problem. Continue to offer positive feedback on the worker's progress in other areas and keep the lines of communication open. If the behaviour resurfaces, confront it immediately and, depending on the situation, take disciplinary action if necessary. This is easier to do if you have a policy in place. If it doesn't already exist, it might be time for you to put it into writing.

As a leader, being the occasional bearer of bad news is an unfortunate part of the job. Whatever the topic—a filthy office, revealing clothing or chronic bad breath—it's not going to be easy. But by approaching the situation directly, empathetically and respectfully, you can help fix "small" problems before they grow into an enormous "elephant in the room" that everyone knows is there, but no one ever talks about.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact Shepell·fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.