

CONFRONTING PROBLEM BEHAVIOR – Part I

Problem behavior can be described as any behavior that gets in the way of achieving predetermined team and/or organizational goals. The problem behavior might cause the person to be less productive than he or she could be and needs to be. The problem behavior might be counter-productive to other team members as well, e.g. disruptive in meetings, consistently late or absent, sloppy work, unsafe practices, etc.

In short, a problem is the difference between a goal and a result; behavior is an observable action. When there is a difference between the expected behavior and the actual behavior, you have problem behavior. The difference could be missed expectations, failed promises, or both.

Many people think confrontation is negative. If someone's behavior is inappropriate, you do the person a disservice by not bringing it to his or her attention. Most, if not all, people want to know if their behavior is counter-productive for achieving the desired results; they want to contribute to the team's success. Often, managers confuse confrontation (positive) with criticism (negative).

Confrontation is not the same as criticism; confrontation is a tool for correcting performance problems or inappropriate behavior. Facing problems squarely and dealing with them in a positive manner will help prevent the possibility of defensiveness, defiance, antagonism, or passive resistance.

Confrontation focuses on a specific performance problem or inappropriate behavior. Criticism focuses on a person or on a personal characteristic. When you tell someone they have a bad attitude or they don't take pride in their work, you are criticizing them. Do not fall into the trap of thinking this is constructive criticism; there is no such thing.

Instead, identify a specific behavior or outcome that leads you to believe the team member needs an attitude adjustment or needs to take more pride in their work. This approach is a lot more constructive and will be more likely to motivate a change in behavior and enhance commitment on the part of the team member.

Confrontation is timely and focuses on specifics. Criticism tends to be general and usually drags baggage from the past by using words such as "always," "never" or "should."

Confrontation focuses on improvement. Criticism focuses on blame. Improvement requires change; and the only thing that can be changed is the future. When you focus on what needs to change, you are using positive confrontation. Criticism focuses on the past, which cannot be changed. It is designed to make people feel guilty. Criticism might make someone change their behavior, but, more than likely, it will cause resentment and a desire to "get even."

Confrontation also focuses on improving relationships. When a team member isn't performing up to standard or exhibits inappropriate behavior, "letting it go" or "looking the other way" will eventually damage the relationship and, possibly, cause the team member to be terminated. This, obviously, is not good for the relationship. Ignoring problem behavior can also damage your relationships with other team members who are meeting or exceeding expectations.

Many managers or supervisors tend to avoid confronting until it becomes a last resort strategy. When this happens, tension in the relationship goes up and effective communication becomes more difficult than it needs to. Look for opportunities to use positive confrontation to improve performance of individual team members and correct inappropriate behavior to achieve better results.

In Part II, we'll delve into specific steps you can take to confront problem behavior.