

## Are Difficult Discussions Really Difficult?

Virtually any manager, supervisor or leader who is doing their job responsibly will need to have difficult discussions with their staff periodically. In fact, he/she will likely need to have those discussions with peers and bosses as well. Not uncommonly, we often postpone these talks, hoping the targeted errant behavior or situation will improve on its own or the employee will see the error of their ways by watching others around him/her. Typically, that hope is seldom achieved without some careful, thoughtful and constructive dialogue.

For years, we have been asking audiences at all levels, in all endeavors, this hypothetical question: *If you were doing some part of your job wrong and didn't know it, would you want somebody to tell you?* Of course, the answer is always, “yes,” so the most fundamental reason for delivering a difficult discussion is evident. Research also tells us that the number one reason for poor performance is unclear expectations. Again and again, our clients tell us that when they finally talked to the employee about inadequate performance, the response is often, *“I had no idea that's what you were looking for. I can make that adjustment immediately.”*

So let's look at what makes a discussion fall into the category of “difficult.” Usually, the person who decides this designation is the one who has to initiate the discussion. Unless the situation is due to frequent previous discussions and the problem still persists, the manager may not know what to expect when approaching an employee with constructive feedback. Here is some guidance

that will minimize the negative aspects of a difficult discussion, allow supervisors to have the discussion sooner, and potentially strengthen the relationship with the employee.

### Manage Yourself

A little honest introspection is the best place to start. Internal answers to questions like:

*What am I feeling emotionally about this situation?*

*Why am I having this discussion now?*

*Are my motives totally constructive, or are they punitive?*

*In any previous discussions I've had with this employee, what did I contribute to the fact that it felt difficult?*

Often without realizing it, supervisors, managers and leaders apply their own way of reacting to employees, and from that perspective they place themselves in the shoes of the employee to project how the employee will react. That perspective can contribute to the expectation of a confrontational reaction based entirely on the boss' preconceived notions.

### Make Room for and Insist on Dialogue

Our experience tells us that the discussion is often off to a much better start if the boss starts with a question designed to assess the employee's awareness of the situation. The intent here is to establish a conversation as well as to check the assumptions that the boss made prior to the discussion. Seeking information to validate the leader's assumptions can make a positive difference.

(OVER)

*“Can you tell me what happened yesterday between you and Gladys?”*  
*“I’d like to get your perspective on what happened yesterday that resulted in shutting down the line.”*  
*“Can you review with me the objective you had on the XYZ project?”*

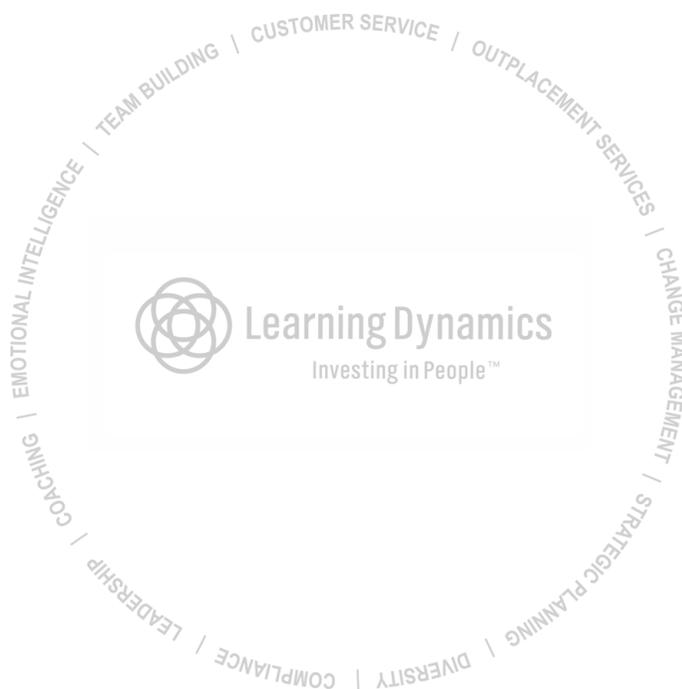
When the goal is fully constructive, then the approach throughout the discussion is one of joint problem solving. That approach requires information, perspective, and initiative from both parties.

### **Choose the Location Carefully**

Think about the best location to set the employee at ease and facilitate discussion. If the employee

has never been invited into your office but today he/she is, we can expect wariness and suspicion, neither of which contribute to joint problem solving. Looking at location from the employee’s point of view may make a difference in the tenor of the discussion.

Actually, very few discussions should be classified as “difficult.” With a positive, well managed approach, discussions that are designed to help an employee get back on track need not be problematic or confrontational. If the leader can approach the situation from a coaching standpoint, most employees are willing, even eager, to hear what the coach has to say, especially if it helps them improve their performance.





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