

Happy Spring 2006! This month's newsletter provides helpful tips on how to effectively navigate emotionally charged conversations at the workplace. Yes, that's right, at the workplace.

FIRST EMOTIONS THEN LOGIC

By Carol Bergeron

As leaders one of your most important responsibilities is communication. It includes sharing information, soliciting ideas, thinking out loud together, inquiring through questions, listening, summarizing, coaching and articulating a direction. Sometimes it is part of implementing new decisions that have broad impact. Examples include changes in the organization's direction, strategies or business practices. It also includes situations that affect only a few people such as unrealized promotions and project cancellations.

Depending on the issue you, your leadership team and others invest countless hours: analyzing the situation, gathering data, collecting input and opinions from others, and thinking creatively through the goals, alternative solutions and ramifications. You work tirelessly to balance the needs of investors, customers and affected employees.



When it came time to share the outcome and supporting logic face-to-face with employees you never got around to communicating the rationale behind the decision. Instead you were knee deep in emotionally charged conversations. Why? Perhaps unknowingly you hit a hot button. Maybe the issue was similar to previous experiences and conjured up bad memories. Whatever the reason, here are a few tips on how to better navigate individual conversations. Couple them with your own tried and true methods.

1. **Anticipate a response where emotions are expressed first** and rational thinking second. This response can be just as prevalent among employees who participated in the analysis and decision making as those who did not. Why? Humans are emotional beings whether at work or at home. While it is difficult to predict the response of any one person, do expect the right side of the brain to dominate some employee responses.
2. **Communicate the decision and listen.** Be direct in communicating the message then pause to create space for the employee to talk, ask questions and express feelings. As you intently listen the employee is signaling you on how to proceed: "Stop I need to vent." or "Help me understand your logic." or "Where do we go from here?" or "That's the best news I've heard all day."
3. **Acknowledge feelings in order to effectively deal with them.** Using statements such as "I get that you are angry and surprised that you did not get the promotion." or "I understand you are upset by this benefit change because it directly impacts you and your family." then pause. If you incorrectly assessed the emotion or what seemingly prompted the emotion, the employee will set you straight. This approach helps to understand specifically what you are dealing with in a manner respectful of the employee.
4. **Probe for better understanding** as insight for moving forward. Think of the conversation as an onion and your job is to peel away its layers until you and the employee, sometimes for the first time, better understand the feelings and thinking behind them. Effective probing questions include "What is it that influenced you to feel that way?" or "Would you please help me understand what led you to think that?" or "How did you arrive at that conclusion?" Probing questions often serve as a bridge between right and left brain thinking.
5. **Broaden understanding to include the rationale.** Just like you sought to understand employee thinking; now it is your responsibility to express your thinking. You have been examining the issue for some time while employees have not. Verbalizing the connections between the challenge, views of the stakeholders and the decision can go a long way toward increased understanding. Plus it can serve as a starting point for repairing any ill will. Employees may take comfort in learning a sound logic was behind the decision even if they disagree with it. So securing acceptance of the decision and understanding the logic may be a reasonable outcome while getting agreement on the logic may not.

6. **Reconvene if things get too fired up.** There are times when it is best to suspend a lively conversation that is going nowhere and reconvene at a time when fresh perspectives prevail.
7. **Develop the wisdom to know which decisions are changeable.** Some expressed concerns may warrant revisiting decisions while other decisions are not reversible. It is best to avoid statements that may pacify employees that later lead to unmet expectations and the erosion of trust and credibility.
8. **Recognize when beliefs and values are incompatible.** There may be times when values fundamental to the organization go against the personal belief or value systems of employees. Sometimes these can be resolved and other times not. The first step toward resolution however is to recognize the difference.
9. **Know when to move on.** Rather than get stuck indefinitely conclude the initial issue even if it means you agree to disagree on the logic. Then move onto another matter important to the employee to secure commitment.

Longer-term proactive steps include:

10. **Recognize the personal impact decisions have.** People often personalize decisions that impact them at least initially. This happens in the family, at work, in the neighborhood and the broader community. Recognize and factor them into your initial communications alongside the logic. This action alone may decrease, though not eliminate, the time you spend helping others manage their emotions.
11. **Help employees better manage their emotions.** Build the emotional intelligence (EQ) of your organization through education and coaching before conflicts arise. Help employees understand what emotions are, their relationship to events, physiological changes and behaviors and how to manage them in a highly productive way. Research shows that companies comprised of people with high EQs produce better results.

UPCOMING EVENTS & INTERESTING RESOURCES

Attention Consultants: "Ignite Your Business Potential" at the Institute of Management Consultants New England Chapter 2006 Conference. **Friday, April 7, 2006, 8:15am – 3:00pm, Hilton Garden Inn, Waltham, MA.** Keynote: Alan Weiss, author of Million Dollar Consulting, Speakers: Diane Darling, President of Effective Networking Inc., Harvy Simkovits of Business Wisdom and Brooks Fenno of Salesmark. Register: www.imcne.org. Don't miss this opportunity to learn from speakers and each other with plenty of networking time.

2006 Schedule for Educational Workshops at www.bergeronassociates.com/calendar.htm.

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