

# Tough Conversations Guide

Being an effective manager means confronting those "challenging" employees who, while typically good at their jobs, too often display unprofessional or downright obnoxious behavior. The best way to tackle such problems is to meet with employee right when you spot the problem behavior

**Explain the problem, impact** - when you sit down with the employee, use the D-I-S method:

- **Direct.** Precisely pinpoint the problem—don't beat around the bush. Don't feel bad about being direct. Every manager has the right to demand that employees behave in a courteous and cooperative manner.
- **Immediate.** Talk with employees right after you see (or hear about) offending behavior. That makes it harder for the employee deny the behavior.
- **Specific.** Explain concrete examples of the employee's actions, how they affect co-workers. A vague accusation like, "We hear you're being rude to co-workers," isn't as effective as, "Telling Mary her haircut looks like a rat's nest is impolite and it won't be tolerated."

Make sure the employee understands the negative impact of their behavior on morale, productivity, service, etc. Gain agreement with the employee that a problem exists. And discuss the consequences if the problem continues.

**Discuss the solution, follow-up** - don't let such a meeting end without deciding on the best course of action. Generate solutions to correct the problem—even if that just means having the person confirm that "I won't do that anymore." Gain commitment from the employee on their role in solving the problem. Then establish a clear follow-up strategy. Determine how and when you and the employee will review progress. Set a specific date (or dates) for future check-in meetings.

**Document, document** - after the discussion, managers should write a summary to put in the employee's file. Discuss specifics with HR when needed. This summary should be just that—a summary of the problem discussed. It should cite specific examples, the requested improvement (and timeline) and a proposed follow-up plan. The summary should be less than one page and completed in less than one day after the meeting.

**Reasons managers hesitate to confront obnoxious employees** - Sometimes managers recognize why they tolerate habitually impolite employees, and sometimes they don't. Here are four reasons managers put up with such behaviors:

1. "But he/she is one of my top performers." Managers may fear productivity would drop and the worker would be difficult to replace. Perhaps the employee has a special technical skill or valuable institutional knowledge. None of these are good reasons to tolerate unprofessional behavior. While he or she may still be productive, it's quite likely an employee's obnoxious behavior is pulling down the morale and performance of co-workers.
2. "It's not worth the conflict." Management, when executed correctly, involves plenty of face-to-face conflict. But if those interactions are handled correctly, both sides walk away feeling satisfied. Managers can always seek advice from HR before initially bringing up the issue to the employee.
3. "Maybe they will change." Don't count on it.