Leadership techniques for working with high-conflict people

At some point on your leadership journey, you'll work with someone who's difficult to get along with for various reasons.

They interrupt you at meetings and hijack conversations. They seem overly disagreeable -- for example, if you say the cabinet is brown, they say, "it's actually mahogany." You say the restaurant is about a half mile down the road, they say, "it's a café, not a restaurant."

You'll meet complainers, blamers, the overly sensitive, the inflexible and the abrasive. Every leader works with people considered to be "high conflict." Here are some ways to make working with a high-conflict person an opportunity to grow instead of an opportunity to avoid conflict.

Avoid labeling and assuming intention

Two of the biggest mistakes a leader can make is assuming intention and labeling the person accordingly. For example, "She said that on purpose," and "He's just a bully," are two examples of intention and labeling. Even labeling an employee as "high conflict" can cause unintentional problems: The brain looks for evidence of what you already believe to be true. What you focus on expands, so beware of labeling others even if you have solid evidence.

What to do: Describe the observed behavior. Answer the question, 'What are they doing that they shouldn't be doing?" Or, "What are they not doing that they should be doing?" For example, "She interrupts others at meetings, and she should let others finish." You'll find the unwanted or unproductive behavior by answering these questions, and you'll avoid adding your unfiltered interpretations. In short, challenge your assumptions, avoid the tendency to label the other person and, instead, articulate the behavior that needs to be coached.

Stop taking it personally

When you need to ask for behavior change, don't make it personal. Don't tell Paolo he's abrasive, and don't let Andrea know her sarcastic remark hurt your feelings. Their behaviors aren't about you. Instead, frame their behaviors as an advantage or disadvantage to the culture, objectives and their own work performance.

Now that the behavior is about performance, culture and business objectives, it's no longer your personal issue, it's theirs.

What to do: Appeal to their self-interests. What are their goals? What are their fears? For example, if Paolo wants to advance from manager to director, let him know he'll get there faster if he improves his communication skills. Let him know that aggressive behaviors are not tolerated in leadership positions.

Get agreement from Paolo to help him increase his [self-awareness.](#) Suggest coaching to measure improvements and give on the spot feedback. When you appeal to their own self-interest, good employees are willing to make the needed changes to advance their career and elevate their status.

Stop avoiding elephants in the room

Leaders often avoid addressing issues that are sensitive or uncomfortable. For example, an employee tells offensive jokes about gender, race or sexual orientation, disrupting meetings with offbeat humor. This behavior makes you cringe, but then you justify why you've avoided the conversation – for example, that he's a great employee, never missed a day, is always on time and doesn't intend to be mean-spirited. Deep down, you know you need the courage to course-correct this unwanted behavior.

What to do: Reflect back on how you have enabled the behavior, whether it's laughing or avoiding. Decide to stop enabling. The next time the behavior happens, pause, then question Gary's motive.

It goes like this: "Gary, what's your purpose for telling that joke?" Then pause, remaining neutral. It will feel awkward. Gary will say something like, "I'm only joking." This is where you make the shift. You say, "Gary, you're a great guy. I'm sure you didn't mean any harm, but when I hear that kind of joke I cringe. It's disrespectful to women and minorities."

Gary may [defend](#) himself but stay the course and own the part you played.

"Gary, I should have spoken up sooner. It's not fair to you that you are only hearing this now given that it's been part of our culture, but I need you to stop making jokes about anything that puts another person down. Can I get your agreement?"

Since you owned the part you played in enabling, you can start with a clean slate to help the employee make the needed shift willingly.

Conclusion

As a leader, you need the courage and the skills to lead those who exhibit high-conflict behaviors. Remember, people do what they do because it works, and the person with clarity always navigates the ship.

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