

Constructive and Activating Management Techniques

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Summary - Managers frequently say that directing people can be a challenging task. There can be some hard situations in conversations when managers try to direct people. What should you do when an employee reacts defensively and does not acknowledge the point you are trying to make? Or what about an employee who raises all kinds of different subjects and one who complains utterly? This article describes a tool for leading in a constructive and activating manner and for dealing effectively with different kinds of responses by employees

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You are a sales manager responsible for leading a team of salespeople. Mike is a senior salesman with outspoken opinions which he is not shy to

share. He does not have a high opinion of Pascal, a junior salesman in the team. Yesterday, there was an incident between Mike and Pascal. Another salesperson has told you that Mike called Pascal a “loser who will never become a good salesman”. The incident is the talk of the day. Pascal has reported sick. This situation is not acceptable to you and you decide to have a talk with Mike.

1. Preparation: What about? What? Why? You know that this is not a situation which lends itself to a coaching approach. Coaching is a useful approach for helping people solve their problems in cases in which you don't have an opinion about and a stake in what should happen. In this case you do require a specific outcome and that is why this

situation lends itself more for providing direction. Because you notice feeling slightly irritated and you don't want this conversation to lead to accusations and reproaches you decide to prepare it specifically and constructively. In your preparation you avoid heavy-laden and accusative words while making no concession whatsoever regarding your goal. You phrase this goal as much as you can in terms of desired positive results. By doing that, you maximize the chance the conversation will lead to a positive result. You complete the following sentences:

1. I have noticed that
2. How can you accomplish that so that

Through the first sentence (I have noticed that ...) you determine the topic of the conversation (WHAT ABOUT). The first part of the second sentence helps you to make clear WHAT you expect from the employee and the second part helps you to explain WHY you expect this. Through the use of the word 'how' you activate the employee to determine the way in which the results will be achieved. You make clear that this is his responsibility. After thinking about it for a minute you write down:

Mike, I have noticed that there is some rumor about an incident between you and Pascal. You appear to have said that Pascal is not suited for his job. To perform well as a team it is necessary that we treat each other respectfully and help each other to achieve good results. How can you ensure that Pascal knows that you respect him and accept him as a colleague, so that the two of you can achieve good results together and contribute to a positive work atmosphere in the team and to good team results?

2. Different types of responses to your direction

Employees can respond in different ways. We distinguish between visitor-typical responses, complainer-typical responses and customer-typical responses (DeJong & Berg, 2001). It is useful to recognize the employee's type of

response so that you can deal with it adequately. Below, the case is elaborated in three ways.

- a) Visitor-typical responses are responses in which the employee does not see the usefulness and importance of the conversation with you. In the case of Mike, he would respond in a visitor-typical way when he would say: "What's the fuss about? Surely, we have better things to do than talk about this kind of trifle?" A good way of responding is:
- Repeat the nature, the reason and the topic of the conversation
 - Stress the importance: It is important that you ... so that
 - Activate the employee by repeating: How can you accomplish ... so that ...
 - Keep on repeating and stressing these elements as long as the employee keeps on responding visitor-typically. Let the power of repetition work for you.

Mike: What's the fuss about? Surely, we have better things to do than talk about this kind of trifle?

Manager: It is really necessary to talk about it now. It is important that we treat each other respectfully and help each other to achieve good results. How can you make sure that Pascal knows that you respect him and accept him as a colleague, so that the two of you can achieve good results together and contribute to a positive work atmosphere in the team and good team results?

- b) Complainer-typical responses are responses in which the employee does see the importance of the conversation and the topic but also complains and/or behaves helpless. Mike would respond complainer-typical when he would say: "Yes, I regret what happened between Pascal and me but he performs so badly that I thought it was time for the truth to be told. He makes so many mistakes!"

When confronted with a complainer-typical response it is important to stay patient while sticking to the topic. A good response would be:

- Show understanding for the perception and the behavior of the employee: Aha, I understand that you (You don't have to agree with what he says!)
- Activate the employee by repeating: Given that this is the casehow can you accomplish ... so that ...
- Keep on repeating and stressing these elements as long as the employee keeps on responding complainer-typically. Let the power of repetition work for you.

Mike: Yes, I regret what happened between Pascal and me but he performs so badly that I thought it was time for the truth to be told. He makes so many mistakes!

Manager: "Aha, I understand you thought the truth needed to be told because you see Pascal's mistakes. I can imagine this makes it bit harder to stay respectful. Given that this is so, how can you ensure that Pascal knows that you respect him and accept him as a colleague, so that the two of you can achieve good results together and contribute to a positive work atmosphere in the team and good team results?"

- c) Customer-typical responses are responses which show the employee sees the importance of the conversation and the topic and wants to live up to the expectations. Mike's response would be customer-typical when he would say: "Yes, I did not treat him with due respect and I should change that. But he gets on my nerves so much that I don't know how to control myself. Do you have any tips?" A good way of responding is to start coaching. Mike acknowledges the problem, sees the usefulness and the importance of what you ask of him and asks for your help. To provide help is

now the most constructive way of proceeding.

Mike: Yes, I did not treat him with due respect and I should change that. But he gets on my nerves so much that I don't know how to control myself. Do you have any tips?

Manager: I am glad to hear that you see you did not treat Pascal with due respect and that you want to do something about it. I'd be pleased to help you with that.

When confronted with customer-typical responses, it usually works very well to keep on activating the other person to find his own solutions. It is beyond the scope of this article to describe a complete coaching method. On this site you can find some articles with more information.

Finish the conversation with specific agreements on the results to be accomplished. If you can't reach that in one conversation, make a new appointment and continue in that conversation until a clear agreement is reached.

Applications and limitations of this approach

The tools in this article can help you to effectively provide direction to employees. We realize this method oversimplifies reality a bit and that management conversations will not always be a piece of cake. This approach can not guarantee success in 100 percent of your difficult conversations. No method can promise that. Many managers, however, have experienced that this approach helps them to lead clearly and constructively and to keep the responsibility for achieving results with the employee. It turns out, clarity and friendliness very often can go hand in hand.

References

DeJong, P. & Berg, I.K (2001). Interviewing for solutions. Wadsworth Publishing; 2nd edition.