

Holding "Those" Performance Conversations



Overview

Let's be honest: performance conversations can be intimidating and downright scary. So scary that many leaders avoid them at all costs, or dance around the issue by being too soft when they deliver their message. Or worse, are so anxious to get it over with that they hit the employee with a verbal two-by-four and quickly leave the scene with the employee left alone to manage the emotional wake that was created. None of those approaches achieves the intended results of holding performance conversations: *improved performance and productive workplace behavior*.

Leaders often confess that they simply do not know HOW to deliver a "difficult" message in an effective way. They don't know what words to use to begin the conversation, are unsure of what to do if the employee reacts strongly to the message, or what approach to use to end the dialogue having both parties in agreement that there won't be a need to repeat the scenario. Even if they have followed many recommended steps, there is lingering doubt that compliance will be sustained, or the relationship will be damaged or weakened as a result of the conversation.

Why it matters:

In a workplace poll, 93% worked every day with a person they find hard to work with because of broken commitments or bad behavior. But neither the co-workers nor the

leaders held the person accountable because they felt it was too risky. This cone of silence perpetuates poor performance, toxic work environments, and creates all sorts of quality and safety issues. It is often cited as one of the top reasons employees seek other jobs.¹

How to Navigate Accountability Conversations

The heartening news is that leaders can learn how to initiate conversations with employees and coworkers that not only hold others accountable for their commitments but strengthens the leaders' confidence to hold them more often. In their book, *Crucial Accountability: Tools for Resolving Violated Expectations, Broken Commitments, and Bad Behavior*, Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, and Switzler uncovered a method for effectively holding people accountable. In their study, they looked at “positive deviants”—those who were challenged with employee performance issues but were able to find ways to achieve optimum results. They observed these skilled individuals in action and identified the approaches they used that distinguished them from less successful leaders. They fashioned the skills demonstrated by the positive deviants into a skillset that illuminates the way to have accountability conversations *before, during, and after* a preceding event. These skills strengthen trust and predictability within the workplace. The following summarizes the approach recommended by the authors to obtain the desired results.

Before an Accountability Conversation Happens

It is important for leaders to carefully choose their words and to anticipate how their delivery can result in success or failure. If leaders are not in the right frames of mind, no amount of preparation will produce the intended outcomes. Leaders who master these conversations make certain their thoughts are in order that they are talking about the right problem, and that they have any strong emotions in check to avoid perceiving the other person as the villain. Many leaders become so wrapped up in the details of what happened related to broken commitments or bad behaviors, that the last thing on their minds is carefully creating the “right environment” to hold the conversation. To make matters worse, leaders often have strong emotions about what has happened; concluding their interpretation of events is the only “truth” without hearing the employee’s side of the story. This usually results in establishing a mindset that the other person is guilty. Going into an accountability discussion at this point, with your “moral superiority” showing, is a certain predictor of catastrophe. So, what is the better alternative?

Instead of leaders telling themselves that the employee who demonstrated bad behavior or broke a commitment is “an idiot (or other choice label),” consider this question, “Why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do that?” That inquiry typically recalibrates a leader’s view about the employee. It forces leaders to look elsewhere for why a rational person (the employee in question) would be acting so irresponsibly. The authors call this “amplifying your situational view.” It enables leaders to gain deeper insights into why people do what they do so that performance conversations are approached from a more effective mindset. When that shift happens within the leader, the employee is less likely to feel defensive, blamed, or reactionary and is more apt to work with the manager towards a productive, sustained change in behavior.

During an Accountability Conversation

Begin it well. Don’t shoot from the hip. Know exactly what you are talking about: *a performance gap between what you expected and what happened*. For the purposes of this article, a gap is a serious deviation from standards or expectations that could be risky to discuss. These are called crucial conversations because the stakes are high.

Because of the importance of this critical juncture, avoid using these commonly ineffective approaches: playing games (the proverbial “sandwich” approach of placing the “bad” in between two “goods”) or charades (hints and innuendo); passing the buck (“I’m the good cop; my boss is the bad cop”); and, expecting them to read your mind (“Do you know why I asked to talk with you?”). Instead, these steps will produce a better outcome:

- Make the other person feel as safe as possible about the topic being discussed. Describe the performance gap in such a way that you invite, rather than alienate the other person, making it comfortable for him or her to stay part of the conversation. This is the face-to-face leadership challenge that is not taught in any business course. Simply state the gap between what was expected and what was observed: *“Dan, you agreed to complete the financial report needed for tonight’s board meeting by five PM yesterday. It is 9:00 AM, and I still do not have the report.”* Keep your tone of voice and facial expressions neutral so that no disrespect is conveyed. Remember your mindset: this person is rational, reasonable, and decent. You are intentionally withholding a judgment of “guilty” until you know the facts.
- Use what the authors call the “Path to Action Model.”

- The model begins with the actions of the employee occurring (the performance gap), you seeing that action (or hearing about it), then telling yourself a story about the employee's motives without verifying the facts, which causes you to feel something, and then you act. Many leaders go off-track at this point because they charge ahead with their judgments or stories. Using the example above, it might sound like this, *"Dan, you obviously don't care enough about the importance of this board meeting. You always put this off to the last minute and don't seem to mind that the rest of the team has to work extra hard to get everything together. This is so typical of you!"*
- Instead, stick with the facts and add some parts of your story that don't include jumping to a conclusion that could put Dan on the defensive or disrespect him. *"Dan, the report was due at 5:00 pm yesterday. It is 9:00 am and the board packets can't be assembled until we have that report. I am beginning to think you are not seeing this as a high priority."*
- Then end with a question, *"What happened?"* and listen carefully to his explanation in order to diagnose the root cause to the performance gap.

Wrapping up the Conversation

Just as you began the conversation well, you want to finish it well. You have described the gap, you've listened to the reasons, and now you must assess if the problem is related to motivation or ability. Both barriers can be overcome by involving the employee in the solution. A solutions-focused approach is empowering; it is not a gimmick to trick the employee into thinking it was their idea, but rather a very effective way to explore the underlying blocks and remove them—together!

But, knowing HOW to remove them is the next crucial step, especially if you are dealing with long-term factors. Involving the employee in the decision-making helps to ensure that you are uncovering deep-rooted issues as well as the employee's perspective on possible ways to fix them. Ask him or her "what do you think it will take to close this performance gap?" Then, determine, can s/he do it, does s/he need help from others, and are there structural or environmental tools that might interfere with the solution.

Don't forget to confirm his/her willingness once you both determine the solution(s). An employee who is willing to work on a barrier shows that s/he is motivated to improve. However, if you find that lack of willingness is a factor, then you must look deeper into motivational issues.

After an Accountability Conversation

Work together to create a plan and be specific about what comes next, including scheduled follow-up meetings. FranklinCovey's *Great Leaders, Great Teams, and Great Results* training, offers a tool for solid performance management called a Win-Win Performance Agreement. It is a written understanding that clarifies expectations between leaders and employees. The following steps demonstrate this simple, but effective, approach.

- **Desired Results**
List the few key goals for performance improvement over a specified time period. Be sure to include metrics that indicate achievement of the goals.
- **Guidelines**
If there are standards or guidelines that must be met, list them.
- **Resources**
If there are people, monetary considerations (budget), tools, or other materials that will enable the closing of the performance gap, include them in the agreement.
- **Accountability**
achieving progress on the goals is dependent on accountability and frequent check-ins. This ensures that if a course correction is needed, it happens as soon as the goal begins to go off-track.
- **Consequences**
define how both the leader (or the organization) and the employee will benefit from achievement of the goals, as well as what will happen if the agreement is not fulfilled. Always think Win-Win.

Going back to our example of Dan and his failure to deliver a critical financial report in time for the board meeting, let's see how this might play out when Dan and his boss create a Win-Win Agreement.

- **Desired Result:** Produce accurate financials for all upcoming board meetings within 24 hours of the start of the board meeting. If the board meeting begins at 5:00 PM on Thursday, this means that the financials are due at 5:00 PM on Wednesday, the day before the meeting.
- **Guidelines:** Follow policies and procedures for financial reports and ensure they are accurate before submitting them for the Director's review.
- **Resources:** Dan will receive up to 15 hours of administrative support during the week of each board meeting to assist in preparing and accurately checking all financials before submittal to the Director.

- **Accountability:** Dan and the Director will meet one hour each week until December 31, 2024, to review this agreement and any other potential barriers that might occur that would prevent him from achieving his goal.
- **Consequences:** Dan's credibility and that of our organization will be damaged with the Board of Directors if accurate and timely financial reports are not produced for their review.

There is no way to overestimate the power of an accountability conversation to transform organizations. If leaders who say they believe in accountability no longer struggle with HOW to practice it, we would have healthier organizations built on strong cultures that confront the tough issues interfering with organizational effectiveness.

Accountability is more easily achieved when leaders can and do choose their actions and words beforehand, intentionally strive to have a mindset that assumes the best of the employee, provide clear descriptions of gaps in performance while offering what good performance looks like, and, finally, work in partnership with the employee to create Win-Win Performance Agreements.

References:

¹VitalSmarts study: Corporate Untouchables. September 2006.

Patterson, Kerry, Grenny, Joseph, Maxfield, David, McMillan, Ron, and Switzler, Al. 2013. *Crucial Accountability: Tools for Resolving Violated Expectations, Broken Commitments, and Bad Behavior*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill Education.

FranklinCovey. 2006. Leadership: Great Leaders. Great Teams. Great Results. Salt Lake City, UT: Franklin Covey Company. [Training Materials.]