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Six Tips for Turning Around Negativity at Work



Conflict is like wind.

Too much causes destruction of people and property.

Too little and no transformation can occur.

A client of mine (a manager) was having a perfectly wonderful day when a man called to complain about one of the manager's employees. The exchange affected his entire day, plus his weekend, his sleep, and his ability to concentrate on important priorities.

How often do you let a negative interaction ruin your peace of mind? It



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doesn't have to happen. Here are six tips that can help you turn around negative interaction.

1. "What has happened that makes you think _____?"

Communication breakdowns are common in every workplace. There are many steps you can take to either prevent those breakdowns or mitigate the damage. Escalation usually occurs when someone jumps to conclusions. Check out assumptions before you react by asking a simple question that starts with these words: "What has happened that makes you think ____?" or "What makes you say ____?" You will be amazed at how quickly you can diffuse the situation by getting clear on the facts.

For example:

Customer: "You people here are so unprofessional!"

Response (in a calm, respectful, matter-of-fact tone): "What has happened that makes you think we are unprofessional?"

Customer: "You filled out this form incorrectly and now I'm going to lose my credit rating!"

Response: "I can see why you'd be upset. I can assure you that this error will be corrected immediately and it will not affect your credit rating. Just for future reference, it is not our department that creates these forms, but we are happy to help you sort it out."

2. Call a "Time Out"

If your back brain (or fight-or-flight response) gets triggered by a negative interaction, you know you are feeling either afraid or angry. Once fear or anger is triggered, your quality of judgment, communication skills, and your ability to see solutions all decrease. Your physiology prepares to attack or run away. Adrenaline pumps into the bloodstream, heart rate increases, blood pressure goes up, muscles tense, voice changes pitch, pupils enlarge, etc. It is only when your physiology returns to normal that you can have a constructive conversation. Try taking a walk down the hall and take some long, slow breaths or simply count to 10 before responding.

3. Vent your negative feelings in a constructive way

If technique #2 doesn't work, take a longer break. Calmly and respectfully re-schedule a discussion for later in the

day, when you've had time to reflect.

Go for a vigorous walk or run, write out your thoughts, or talk out the situation with an objective third party. Once you diffuse the negativity, you will be able to see win-win solutions that were not apparent before.

4. State a collaborative intent

Once back in the conversation, start with such words as, "I would like to find an outcome to this issue that works for both of us (or for all parties concerned)." Or "My intent is to figure out a way where you can get what you need in a way that works for all of us."

5. Reframe the situation in the positive

Summarize the other person's complaint, then re-state it in positive terms. For example, "You say you feel that the new schedule is unfair. It sounds like it is unworkable for you because of family commitments. So what you are really looking for is a schedule that works for your job as well as for your family. Is that correct?" After the response, say, "My intent is the same: I want you to meet your family commitments and for us to meet our obligations to our customers. Let's put our heads together and I'm sure we can find a workable solution."

6. Think outside the box

Once you have cleared up assumptions, vented negativity in a constructive way, stated a collaborative intent, and reframed the needs in a positive way, you will start to see possibilities. Take a few minutes to simply brainstorm on a number of possible solutions without editing the ideas. Once your list is in place, you two can choose the one(s) that would best serve the needs of all people concerned. ▲

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