Why Most Managers Avoid Hard Conversations — and How to Stop Letting It Cost You Millions

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Key Takeaways

- Effective management requires strong communication skills, including the ability to handle difficult conversations with transparency and empathy.
- Avoiding tough discussions can lead to decreased morale, productivity decline and lost revenue, which is why you need to address issues head-on.
- Investing in communications training and emotional intelligence can empower managers to foster a positive work environment and enhance team dynamics.

When we think of what makes a successful manager, we often think of those with a clear vision to guide their team toward strategic goals, who have the ability to inspire and empower employees and who possess strong organizational and time-management skills and effective problem-solving abilities, are confident decision-makers, are transparent, have integrity and are accountable. Successful managers are also those who have developed strong communication and interpersonal skills, actively listen, demonstrate emotional intelligence and are empathetic, creating a positive, supportive and collaborative work environment.

An integral part of having strong communication and interpersonal skills is the ability to engage in difficult conversations rather than shying away from addressing problems and issues head-on, even when they are uncomfortable. We often find ourselves dodging or suppressing issues in our personal lives, which can have a high emotional cost.

In a high-performance company, managers who avoid confronting what needs to be said or done can cost the business millions in missed opportunities, revenue and inefficiencies.

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What keeps managers from leveling with employees?

Most managers avoid confrontation because they feel uncomfortable speaking the truth. It's awkward. They are afraid of how the person will react and if the person will become defensive. Often, they don't know how to approach the matter or lack the confidence or skills to talk about a sensitive or difficult situation. There's also a bit of wishful or magical thinking going on, where managers believe the situation will resolve itself, so they take a wait-and-see approach.

Some managers want to be liked and avoid being perceived as the "bad guy." They don't want to be the bearer of bad news, especially when there is no warning or perceived issue.

In some situations, the facts may be unclear, making it more challenging to substantiate what needs to be said, especially if the company's policy on a specific issue is vague.

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The domino effect: When things go unsaid

Let’s say you have an employee who is smart, puts in the time and gets things done. However, his attitude is rough around the edges, particularly in the way he speaks to his colleagues. You don’t want to rock the boat because he really knows his stuff. But you risk losing other valuable workers who are tired of tiptoeing around the brash individual, even as he gets things done.

Or you have an employee who is counting on a promotion. During her last performance review, she made it clear that she wanted a career path within the company, and you advised her that a management position would soon become available that was suited to her talents and skills. Unfortunately, since then, things have changed significantly at the company, and a promotion is not forthcoming in the near future. You haven’t had the conversation with her because you’re afraid she’ll quit.

In both cases, keeping silent makes things worse. Failing to address an employee’s rudeness or poor attitude can cause overall morale and productivity to decline, creating a toxic environment and the risk that good employees will leave the organization. Taking the time to have a genuine conversation and offering coaching and other communication training tools would not only help your employee become better at their job but would also signal to everyone that you value them, want to retain the team intact and embrace a positive culture.

In the other situation, failing to inform an employee that she won’t be receiving a promotion in the near future lacks transparency and fosters mistrust. It’s better to be up front, explain the current state of affairs at the company and work together to determine what would keep her challenged and willing to stay on until something truly opens up. At best,

she takes the risk that a promotion with more responsibilities will arise down the road. At worst, she will appreciate your frankness even if she chooses to leave. Either way, you don't want disgruntled, disillusioned employees working for you. This affects how they treat each other, your customers and your vendors, and it impacts your bottom line.

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Communications training: The power of straight talk

A critical component of management communications training should include strategies for initiating and having difficult conversations with employees. Offer best practices and techniques on how to conduct challenging conversations with empathy and respect. Showing empathy will likely help diminish a defensive response from an employee, making them more open to hearing and taking in what's being said.

Provide role-playing exercises and real-life scenarios that help managers connect to situations they are most likely to encounter. They can practice tone, timing and phrasing in a safe environment. Practice will help managers refine their messaging and provide confidence that they can handle an uncomfortable conversation.

Additional training can include emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, giving and receiving feedback and managing reactions under pressure. This can help managers approach tough discussions with clarity, confidence and respect, turning potentially uncomfortable moments into opportunities for growth and stronger workplace relationships.

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Yes, it’s tough having to walk the tough talk, but it’s best to address the issue early and openly. Procrastinating will only make things worse for you, your team and the business. Having the hard conversations will make you a better leader and contribute to shaping a culture of transparency, openness and accountability.

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