

Resolving Interpersonal Issues

Uday Arur

A well-known psychotherapist from Mumbai writes a regular newspaper column, in which she takes up everyday interpersonal issues and provides simple and sensible solutions to them. The theme of one such had great relevance to some tricky interpersonal issues, which have to be tackled by line managers.

Line managers are often faced with challenges of making ordinary people perform extraordinarily. This calls for some extraordinary interpersonal skills on the part of line managers. It is in these situations, that the advice the column offers has special significance.

There are occasions, when managers find it difficult to make their subordinates do the things they want them to do. How does one tackle such difficult staff? Most managers dread confrontations because they are unpleasant and could lead to soured relations, which could have a possible impact on the territory sales – especially in the case of a star salesman. Yet, not confronting the person does not solve the problem, as the unresolved issues affect relationships anyway. In such situations, says the psychotherapist; the real problem lies not in the manager's dashed expectations, but in his style of confrontation.

The problem lies in the use of character-based confrontations. Managers resort to shaming ("You make me sick"), blaming ("It's all your fault"), discounting ("You will never improve") or negative labeling ("You are a liar") of their subordinates. The only advantage of character-based confrontations is that the manager is able to give vent to his anger and hurt.

These could lead to angry, messy showdowns and bring all rational discussions to a grinding halt.

It is important to remember, says the psychotherapist, that a subordinate's self-image (as with all human beings), is his most precious possession. It is the way he views and regards himself in his own and others eyes. As self-conscious beings, people are acutely aware of their own image and constantly work towards protecting it from any damage.

People also seek approval from others for their own self-image. If there is even the slightest threat this self-image, they feel extremely upset because their character is the very essence of their beings.

The solution lies in the use of *issue-based* confrontations. This approach leads to a reasonable dialogue with the subordinate over unmet expectations, as it concentrates on his specific problematic action, which has upset the manager.

The approach involves an explanation of which action has bothered the manager, in what manner it is affecting him, and what changes the manager would like from his subordinate. For instance, "It bothers me when you don't come on time for meetings. It delays the proceedings and it wastes time, which the team could have spent on productive issues. I would like to know what you propose to do, so that you come in time for the next meeting."

As you can see, the approaches of issue-based confrontations help communicate respect and regard for subordinates, as they keep the comments and reactions restricted to the behaviour.

Subordinates can hear managers without much defensiveness, even if they disagree with the manager. Most importantly, says the psychotherapist, such confrontations give the subordinates a chance to change, avoid, explain and clarify actions, as well as make amends wherever possible. Issue-based confrontations can lead to better understanding and cooperation because they help the subordinate to repair the bad impression that a problematic action may have caused.

On the other hand, resort to character-based confrontations can lead to major breakdowns in communications, no matter how well the manager's intentions. Such confrontations bruise the character and do not give the subordinate the slightest scope to do anything about the issue.

Any threat to the subordinate's self-image will only lead to counter attacks, defensiveness or complete withdrawal. The manager might even risk losing an important relationship, as it can become an all-out battle.

It is only natural for every manager to have expectations of his subordinates – after all, the company pays him to realize precisely these expectations. The manager should remember that the subordinate does not always know when he has let him down. So, it becomes important for the manager to have effective ways of communicating his disappointments about unmet expectations from him.