

EAP Newsletter: Supervisor



Managing tense conversations in the workplace

Life Advantages, LLC

Many of us struggle with handling conflict—especially in the workplace—because it is not typically a skill taught in school, at home, or by society at large. Strong communication techniques are essential in order to manage workplace conflict so we can continue to collaborate effectively with others on projects, complete work tasks, voice our ideas, and generally get along with others. FCH EAP understands the unique challenges leaders face when attempting to have effective, respectful and compassionate workplace conversations when the subject may be tense or triggering. Even if you are familiar with effective communication principles, it is helpful to remind ourselves of communication techniques we can improve on or implement, especially when we need to disengage from or defuse tense conversations in the workplace. **Read more below for helpful information on navigating tense conversations and remember that FCH EAP is available to you.**

Be aware of your own emotional state

Ask yourself questions such as: Do I feel tension in my body? What are the feelings I am having, and what are some of the reasons I am feeling upset, angry, or frustrated?

Am I making assumptions or personalizing what my coworker, boss, or employee is saying? Am I being triggered because this situation and/or person reminds me of another person in my life that I don't get along with? The goal here is to recognize that we are responsible for how we feel and react to the situation.

Use reflective listening skills

Once we have identified what we are feeling and why, it is crucial to use reflective listening skills. This not only shows the other person we are listening, but also helps us to understand the other person's perspective. We can do this by paraphrasing what the other person said rather than focusing on what we are going to say next and getting our point across. An example of reflective listening is, "So what I hear you saying is . . ." This is an important part of validating their perspective and is a key step in helping to diffuse tense interactions.

Incorporate "I" messages in your communication

For example, an "I" statement may sound like this: "I am feeling a bit frustrated/overwhelmed when you give me tasks to do at the end of the day because I often have to pick up my children at a particular time and can't be late. I would appreciate it if you could give me those tasks earlier in the day if possible or understand if I am unable to complete them by working overtime."

This approach is an effective way to communicate our needs or wants in a non-confrontational manner.

If you have used reflective listening to try to validate and diffuse the conversation with a coworker, but it becomes clear that they are unable to have a civil conversation because they are too angry to listen to reason, then using healthy boundaries is the best option. For instance, one might say to the person,

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"I can see this situation or topic is really upsetting to you, and I am willing to talk it through with you, but right now does not seem like the best time for either of us, so let's revisit this conversation later." However, if it is not an issue essential to resolve for work purposes, then an appropriate boundary-setting comment would be: "I can see you are very upset about this, but it is not helpful for us to continue this conversation because it is not relevant to our job duties."

The strategies described above of being aware of your own emotional state, using reflective listening, and incorporating "I" statements when communicating with others are all critical practices we need to use in the workplace if we want to have more satisfactory interactions and relationships at work. It is also important to remember that we do not have control over how other people react. However, if we choose to take responsibility for our own reactions and implement these skills, we can learn to manage tense conversations, maintain boundaries, and avoid detrimental outcomes.

The EAP is Here to Support Supervisors

As leaders, we often think we need to have all the answers and that can be isolating. You do not have to problem-solve alone. If you have questions about how to respond to a difficult workplace situation, call and request a confidential supervisor consultation with an experienced FCH EAP clinician at 1-800-777-4114.