

Confronting Problem Behavior

© 2011 Brad Lebo

brad.lebo@vitalgrowthllc.com

If you look forward to confronting problem behavior and don't rely on intimidation, you have my utmost respect. You also probably don't need to read any further.

If, however, you're like the majority of people, confronting problem behavior is something you dread. You might even avoid dealing with it at all, making you eligible for all those unpleasant labels: co-dependent, enabling or "in denial."

There is hope! Confronting problem behavior is a skill that can be learned—and even mastered. With a little practice, you'll be good at confronting the problem behavior of an employee or peer. It's even possible to learn how to confront the problem behavior of a boss or customer.

There are substantial benefits from learning how to confront problem behavior. In the workplace there are financial returns that add up, like those from tackling off-task behaviors of certain employees. Over time, these off-task behaviors reduce productivity and add expense. There is the benefit of reducing risk, like the risk associated with unethical behavior that leads to complaints, lost customers and, potentially, civil or criminal action (fines, lawsuits, etc.). And, there is the "priceless" result of confronting someone in authority (such as a doctor or pilot) who is on the verge of making a tragic mistake that leads to injury or loss of life.

These benefits double if you are able to take satisfaction from preventing waste, wrongdoing or tragedy. They may multiply even more if you stop someone from behaving in a way that takes advantage of or otherwise misuses you.

To confront problem behavior, while keeping your own discomfort to a minimum, follow these five steps:

Step 1 - Determine the "gap" between the behavior you observe and the behavior you desire. Determine this gap with "clinical detachment": observe the difference between what someone is doing and what you want them to do without getting into the whys and wherefores. This step is best done alone with the time to think about what the person is doing and how it is different than what you expect or need.

Example: Phil is frequently late for the start of the workday. Not: Phil seems to be late a lot because he doesn't care about being on time for work.

Step 2 - Determine the source of the "gap" between desired and observed behavior. Try to understand where the difference in behavior comes from.

This step is a difficult to get right because there is a natural tendency to attribute the problem behavior to a character flaw or other deficit in the person's makeup. Indeed, it is a challenge for most of us to not start thinking of what is wrong with the person who is under-performing. We tend to think of such a person as "lazy," "stupid," or "arrogant."

Usually, however, we are wrong in our assessment. Being wrong about the source of the problem behavior has a couple of consequences. First, what corrective action can you take when someone is "lazy," "stupid," or "arrogant"? There are really no corrective steps to take, if the source of the problem is a character flaw.

Second, thinking of someone as flawed raises the emotional stakes in any discussion about planning to correct the behavior problem. Just think of the difference between having to work with someone you think is "stupid" and working with someone who you think is bright but could use training.

Typically, the source of a behavior problem is something other than a character flaw. More frequently, gaps in behavior are a symptom of poor understanding of expectations, misunderstood priorities, insufficient experience or training, or lack of motivation to complete the desired tasks. Sometimes, the source of the problem behavior is constraints in procedures or resources.

Getting to the source of the problem is a detective's job that includes observing the behavior, accurately and dispassionately describing the problem behavior, and asking the offenders why they are behaving the way they are. Doing the detective job well means establishing rapport with them so they are not put on the defensive. It also means talking to them in a way that makes them feel you are really trying to understand their view of the source of the problem behavior and not looking for ways to find fault and pin blame.

Example: Phil does not prioritize being on time (even though his boss does). He has a babysitter who is frequently late to arrive to take care of his infant son—making him late, in turn. Not: Phil is late frequently because he is lazy or unmotivated to work at his job.

Step 3 - Develop a plan for closing the gap that is satisfactory to both you and the person with the problem behavior. This should be a joint "solution seeking" session. Ideally such a session will include a clear definition of the gap behavior, an exploration of what the source of the problem behavior is, and a collaborative approach to developing corrective action. Also, there should be agreement to get together in several weeks to chart progress. Finally, there should be a discussion about what's going to happen if the problem behavior continues.

Example: After speaking about Phil being tardy and Phil's explanation of why, Phil's boss explains that having his people show up on time is a priority. Phil tells his boss he understands the importance of being on time and will speak to his babysitter about getting there 30 minutes earlier each day to help keep him from arriving late. They agree to meet every two weeks to chart progress and that if he does not close the gap, he'll be given a written warning and eventually let go. Not: Phil, be here on time or be fired.

Step 4 - Re-assess the behavior. Has the behavior changed in the wrong direction, the right direction or not at all?

This step is follow-up to the plan created in step 3 and can take place as frequently as needed. The warning here is that if you don't want problem behavior to grow, don't just address it once or twice and then ignore it whether it gets corrected or not. Nothing grows problem behavior like ignoring repeated offenses or even improvement!

Example: Phil shows up on time and his improved behavior is discussed with him every week for a quarter. Not: Phil continues to be late to work on a frequent basis. His being late is ignored and he feels it must be okay. Others start showing up late, as well.

Step 5 - Dispense consequences or rewards. This step is the opposite of ignoring problem behavior. It is a simple step conceptually but requires discipline to execute. Simply put, reward with praise and potential for greater responsibility, or punish with written warnings that lead to termination.

Example: Phil is praised for making the change that closed the gap in his behavior. Or, Phil is let go or re-assigned. Not: Phil's lateness continues but his boss decides to wait until the annual review to discuss.

Confronting problem behavior is much easier if you can follow these five steps, in particular the step of determining the source of the problem behavior without making assumptions about why it is occurring. Most people want to perform well even if they need to be reminded what exactly that means....

For more information on confronting problem behavior see *Crucial Confrontations* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler, McGraw-Hill (2005).