

NJTC BOOTCAMP

May 23, 2007

Efficiently Operating Your Start Up: 'People' Factors

Difficult Discussions

According to a recent webinar I attended, approximately 26% of a leader's time is spent dealing with conflict of one form or another – production issues; quality control; differences of opinion with key colleagues or investors; employee performance problems; etc. You can avoid it – hope it goes away. You can address it head-on – tell 'em how you *really* feel and let the chips fall where they may. You might just give in to preserve harmony. Unfortunately, none of these options results in a win-win situation.

When stakes and emotions are high, and preserving the relationship is important, the most effective dialog finds a way to get all relevant information (from all parties) out in the open, in a constructive way. First, **assess** the situation. Next, have a **collaborative interaction** with the other person. The following **conflict situation assessment** and **collaborative interaction skills** can be useful guides when you've got to have that difficult discussion, the issue is important, and the relationship is worth saving.

Conflict Situation Assessment.

1. What was said or done -- by all parties concerned -- that triggered the conflict?
Try to cite specific issues and incidents. Avoid blanket criticism. Contain emotions.
2. If by the other person, what led you to perceive their behavior as unfavorable?
If by you, what was your intent; what might have caused the other person to perceive your intentions as unfavorable?
3. Describe your feelings about the situation and your reactions and/or behaviors.
Describe your perception of the other person's, too.
4. What are the cost(s) to you if the conflict is not resolved?
What are the cost(s) to the other person if the conflict is not resolved?
5. What do you really want: for the business, yourself, others, the relationship?
What don't you want? What are your goals? What do you want to change?
What do you think the other party really wants and does not want? Find ways to show the other person that you can relate to their perspective, intentions, etc.

Collaborative Interaction Skills.

Step 1. Find a Time to Talk.

The most basic requirement for managing all human differences is communication. So the first step is to arrange a time when you can talk face-to-face -- directly to the other person, not arbitrarily to anyone who will listen.

Step 2. State the problem/issue/situation and your concern about it.

Objectively stating the issue and your concern about it opens the interaction with focus on the situation, not on the other person, and lessens your chances of getting a defensive reaction.

Step 3. Use facts (not hearsay) to describe the situation calmly and clearly.

Communicating within a substantive context and without an accusatory tone harnesses energy that can produce solutions. Avoid making insulting judgments.

Step 4. Ask for the other person's point of view.

Invite the other person to share his/her rationale or perspective – clarify or challenge your assumptions with an attitude of curiosity and patience. Let him/her talk without interruption.

Step 5. Review the facts and generate alternative solutions.

Discuss the shared pool of information, clarify misunderstandings, and exchange ideas on ways to resolve the problem. If an outside authority or another mutually respected person could aid in this step, reach agreement to involve him/her.

Step 6. Agree on what each person will do to resolve the problem.

Determine who is going to do what, by when, and agree on a follow-up method to assess progress. At this step, “one dull pencil is worth a dozen sharp minds.” Also, some time may be needed prior to this step to conduct research or simply consider all that has been discussed for greater creativity in problem solving.

So, give it a try... pick a relationship, an important issue, and aim for progress... perfection may come eventually. Celebrate your success, then help others hone their **difficult discussions** skill.

Our thanks to Johanna Zitto CPT for contributing this paper. It is intended as information only and is not a substitute for legal or professional advice.

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