OPEN-HEART CONVERSATIONS

Improving Performance, Changing Behaviors, Implementing Discipline

It's sweaty palms time again for you, the manager. This physiological reaction, which may also be accompanied by a dry mouth, a higher pitched voice, a sleepless night, raised blood pressure, and possibly some hyperventilating, is caused by one of three types of events:
1. A meeting with an employee to discuss improving his/her performance,
2. A meeting with an employee to discuss his/her behavior that is causing or may cause disruption within the work environment, and/or
3. A session in which you must implement disciplinary action.

This reaction is a form of stage-fright. It is caused by anticipation because you know that:
- You will be "center stage."
- You have this type of discussion so infrequently that you feel uncomfortable and unsure about what to say and how to say it.
- You do not have any proven methodology for making these conversations objective and emotionally painless for both parties.
- You are concerned about the employee's potential negative reactions (e.g., hurt feelings, anger, defensiveness, violence, verbal threats, retaliation, etc.).
- You know that conversations such as these can form the basis of subsequent employee litigation.

But what if you had a method that:
- Achieves your desired results,
- Places the employee "center stage," rather than you, and
- Utilizes a strategy that minimizes both the employee's overreaction and the potential for employee legal action because it actually improves your relationship with the employee?

CONVERSATION

Improving human communication is probably the single most important strategy for achieving organizational effectiveness. There are many methods of communicating. The primary method throughout the ages has been conversation. One of the ironies of our technologically connected world with its multiple methods of communication is the fact that people have great difficulty communicating with each other on a face-to-face basis.

Additionally in many organizations, conversation has become a competitive exercise where the person who talks the loudest and longest "wins." Maybe we have become hardened by the competitive "conversations" that we see on television from programs with equally

confrontational names like *Hardball* or *Crossfire*. Maybe people are so stressed with the pace of organizational life that they don't have time to converse with others and find it more expedient to talk at other people, rather than talk with people. Whatever the reason for the escalation in fiery rhetoric and the decline in civility, the fact remains that many conversations have a negative impact on all the parties involved as well as on the organization.

In essence, the conversations people have with each other form the basis of relationships. Since conversations form relationships and since organizational life is a series of conversations with others, it can be said that with each conversation a relationship is
- Strengthened,
- Diminished, or
- Remains Unchanged.

This white paper identifies a methodology for strengthening a relationship during a specific type of conversation (performance improvement, behavior change, or discipline) that by its very nature has the potential for diminishing a relationship and the potential for negatively impacting organizational performance.

OPEN-HEART CONVERSATIONS

Performance improvement, behavior change, and disciplinary conversations represent a unique form of the conversations that people have in organizations. These conversations are almost always initiated by a manager and are designed to affect some change on the part of the employee. The change that needs to occur is different than the typical organizational change effort. With this change effort, a manager is confronting one of his/her direct reports with information that the employee is personally failing to achieve an expectation of the manager. As such, a manager needs to display a level of conversational maturity that accomplishes his/her objectives while minimizing conflict.

The potential for conflict is very high in these situations because the personal nature of the topics discussed can generate a range of negative emotions on the part of the employee such as anger and resentment that can escalate into litigation and even workplace violence.

Unfortunately, very few managers are trained to handle the emotional and psychological aspects of these conversations. Management training programs provide minimal instruction on controlling the emotional facets of performance improvement, behavior change, or disciplinary meetings. Disciplinary training programs most often concentrate on tactics that will improve an organization's chances of successfully defending a lawsuit by building a case for termination.

Additionally, the cultures of many organizations view the expression of soft skills on the part of a manager as weaknesses to be eliminated rather than strengths that improve the social fabric of

the enterprise. This combination of inadequate training and corporate bravado leaves a manager in a vulnerable position.

The solution to this problem is the training of managers in a technique developed by Your Part-Time HR Manager[SM], LLC known as **Open-Heart Conversations**.

The purpose of an Open-Heart Conversation is to bring clarity to the employment relationship. An Open-Heart Conversation is a conversational process that enhances an employee's psychological need for self-esteem and control by establishing trust and mutual respect as the backbone of the conversation. But, "What does it mean to converse with an open-heart?"

If it is true that 90% of ending a conflict successfully is in the approach, then it must also be true that 90% of preventing a conflict is in the approach. As such, how a manager approaches an interaction with an employee will significantly determine the impact on the relationship and the success of the outcome.

To converse with an open-heart, a manager must hold two opposing views – a sort of yin & yang of conversation. First, he/she must have the humility (openness) to subordinate his/her feelings and ego for the benefit of the other person and the achievement of organizational goals. In essence, the manager must truly want the employee to change his/her behavior and continue his/her employment. Second, the manager must have the courage (heart) to admit to errors, fearlessly confront the employee's behavior or performance shortcomings, and honestly confront management's contribution to the situation.

At the core of an Open-Heart Conversation are the motives of a manager. The sincerity of a manager's motives plays a major role in the employee's commitment to change. If a manager makes a sincere effort to help the employee improve performance, change behavior, or correct an infraction, the employee will most likely sense the sincerity. If a manager is not sincere in his/her desire to "build a case for improvement" and only uses the Open-Heart process as a format for "building a case for termination," then the employee will most likely sense the insincerity and respond with a fight/flight/freeze reaction.

The key to a manager's motives lies in the fact that the manager cannot have already determined that termination is a forgone conclusion and that any meetings with the employee are simply the formalities that must be endured in order to get the employee fired or frustrated enough to quit.

Unfortunately, a manager often begins these stressful meetings with an employee at the point in time where the manager can no longer tolerate the employee's behaviors, and therefore, the manager wants the employee to change overnight or leave. In other words, instead of addressing the issue when it was first identified, a manager may shrug-off an incident in the hope that it is a one-time event or to avoid the interpersonal discomfort of addressing a sensitive issue. Then, at

the point in time that the situation must be addressed, the manager is usually so frustrated with the behaviors that he/she just wants the issue to stop or go away.

In a manager's urgency to make the behaviors stop or go away, the manager may not want to make the emotional or time commitment to assist the employee in resolving the issues. The end result is that the manager simply goes through the motions of a series of meetings as a way to document enough evidence to eventually terminate the employee.

In many instances, the employee may have never been aware of the impact of his/her behaviors and most likely never had a "reasonable" opportunity to change behaviors. As such, when the urgency of a manager to fix a problem conflicts with an employee's perception that he/she has not had his/her "day in court," the probability of employee litigation increases dramatically.

In order to understand how to utilize an Open-Heart Conversation to enrich a relationship and avoid conflict (i.e., anger, subtle acts of "sabotage," litigation, etc.), one must look at the psychological foundations of conflict. Interpersonal conflicts have 2 major components:
1. Respect
2. Control.

Regardless of the issue, the triggers to most conflict are usually lack of respect (i.e., self-respect and/or respect from others) and the fear or feeling that the person is not in control (control defined as freedom to exercise free will). If one adds to these triggers a manager who is nervous about a potentially emotional meeting with the employee, there is a very high probability that an employee will misread a manager's emotions and intentions.

The Open-Heart Conversation Process dramatically reduces the possibility of misreading emotions and intentions by:
A. Requiring the manager to script opening words for clarity, neutrality, and intent.
B. Using a prepared document (i.e., an Issues Resolution Worksheet) that minimizes "on-the-fly" comments from a manager and reinforces a highly structured conversation.
C. Establishing respect and control as the driving forces behind a manager's words and actions.

There are 3 parts to an Open-Heart Conversation:
1. Opening
2. Discussion
3. Plan of Action/Resolution.

PHASE 1: OPENING:
Phase 1 of an Open-Heart Conversation sets the expectations and emotional tone for the meeting. This Phase will comprise about 10% of the Conversation. We have created a document for a

manager to use during this Opening Phase titled, Issues Resolution Worksheet. The Issues Resolution Worksheet is a tool that is designed to achieve the following purposes:

- Minimize the negative impact of any unconscious inflammatory words of the manager.
- Memorialize the key aspects of the meeting including the consequences if the issues are not resolved.
- Provide a tool for the manager to read that accurately identifies the issues, expectations, observations, etc. rather than relying on the memory of the manager.
- Introduce objectivity into the process with pre-printed statements that encourage the employee to present information about ways in which the manager, others, or the organization may have contributed to the issues.
- Remove the manager as the center of attention and have the employee direct his/her attention to the Worksheet.

Additionally, we have developed a simple 1-minute script, which when used with the Issues Resolution Worksheet establishes a non-threatening tone for the meeting and allows the employee to know that the manager has the employee's best interest at heart.

PHASE 2: DISCUSSION:
The Discussion Phase will comprise 60% of the meeting. It is designed to allow a manager to drill-down for understanding and designed to show the employee the manager's openness and objectivity.

PHASE 3: PLAN OF ACTION/RESOLUTION:
This Phase will comprise about 30% of the conversation. The Plan of Action/Resolution is designed to establish a mutual agreement about what happens next and how the parties will hold each other accountable for success. Assuming the employee has agreed to make changes, the manager and the employee will follow a modified Problem Solving Format for developing a Plan of Action.

CONCLUSION
An Open-Heart Conversation is a formalized approach to discipline, behavior change, and performance improvement discussions that requires the manager to execute a specific behavioral methodology.

Conventional wisdom for managerial behavior in such discussions includes admonitions such as "be strong," "don't back down," "use your authority," "don't take any lip," "be assertive," "be in control," etc. However, the employee response to overly assertive or outright aggressive actions is:
1. Fight,
2. Flight, or
3. Freeze.

This fight/flight/freeze response is particularly evident in disciplinary, behavior change, and performance improvement conversations, especially if the employee has had little advance warning of the purpose of the meeting. As such, these meetings quickly transition into one of three scenarios:

1. A battle of wills (fight response),
2. The employee just "yeses" the manager in order to end the ordeal as quickly as possible (flight response), or
3. The employee has that "deer in the headlights" stare that suggests that nothing is getting through (freeze response).

When this fight/flight/freeze syndrome is activated, an employee finds it very difficult to think rationally.

The Open-Heart Program teaches managers how to eliminate all the macho and ego thumping conventional approaches and provides a methodology for minimizing the fight/flight/freeze response. The Open-Heart Program shows managers the value of making the employee's psyche, not the manager's ego, the most protected element of the conversation, while still achieving the manager's goals of investigating reality, complying with expectations, and enriching the relationship.

Consider for a moment the number of employee relations legal cases filed each year as well as the cost in time and money to defend these cases. If one were to remove the lawsuits that represent blatant discrimination and intentional harm, it is possible that the vast majority of remaining cases could have been prevented by utilizing an Open-Heart Conversation methodology.

In most lawsuits, it is the perceived insult of inappropriate treatment that motivates an employee to seek "justice" via the courts rather than the organization's specific disciplinary actions. An Open-Heart Conversation can eliminate the insult to the employee's psyche.

An Open-Heart Conversation is a technique that represents a philosophical approach to performance improvement, behavior change, and disciplinary meetings in which a manager comes out from behind his/her managerial "mask" and interacts with an employee in a manner that protects the employee's dignity, self-esteem, and independence in order to resolve an issue and improve organizational results.