Leadership

Four Ways To Get Over Your Fear Of Confronting Employees

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As a manager, I probably shouldn’t be admitting this. But, in the hope that this will help another less-than-confident supervisor, here it is: I hate confronting employees. I dislike it so much, in fact, that for the majority of my management career, I flat out avoided it.

And that meant that, for a while, my employees got by with sub-par work, disregard for company rules and policies, and minimal professional growth. All because I was too scared to have serious conversations with them about what they needed to do to improve.

What was it exactly that I was scared of? Well, just about everything: I dreaded the awkward “I need to talk to you in private,” conversation starter, feared that I’d be labeled as the “mean boss,” and expected that my employee would lash out at me with snide excuses. And so, I avoided it like the plague.

But when I realized I wasn’t only being unfair to my boss (by not fulfilling my role as a supervisor), but to my employees (who weren’t gaining anything from my leadership), I knew something had to change. So, here are four ways that I changed my actions—and my mindset—to get over my fear of confrontation.

1. Think From Your Employees’ Perspective

OK, so your employees probably aren’t thinking to themselves, “Man, I wish my manager would tell me I’m doing a bad job.” But put yourself in their shoes: Imagine that you’ve been working day in and day out, thinking that everything’s going fine—until your manager comes to you one day and, without warning, announces, “You’ve been underperforming for months, so we have to let you go.”

Pretty unfair, right?

Constructive criticism is never easy to hear, but when it comes down to it, your employees would rather be told—early on—that their work is lacking, rather than be surprised by more harsh action down the road. Simply by realizing that, confrontation becomes a little less intimidating; in the grand scheme of things, you’re helping your team succeed and avoiding bigger problems down the road.
2. Make it Routine

Because I avoided confrontation so adamantly, whenever I asked to speak with someone privately, it was laughably obvious that he or she was in trouble. (It was reminiscent of when someone would knock on your classroom door in elementary school to announce, “Anna, the principal would like to see you,” and the entire class would resound with a chorus of ominous “ooohs”). Every pair of eyes in the room would follow my employee and me as we walked away—making it pretty awkward for both of us.

To help make things more comfortable all around, I knew had to make these meetings more standard. So, I set up bi-weekly one-on-ones with each of my direct reports.

The content of each meeting varied widely—sometimes, I doled out praise and compliments; other times, I simply checked in on a project status. But occasionally, it gave me the chance to practice communicating constructive criticism.

More than anything, the meetings got me and my employees talking on a regular basis, which helped me practice my confrontational skills. (And as a bonus, when a bigger issue arose, my request to meet with an employee didn’t incite such a grand event.)

3. Steel Yourself

Part of my tendency to avoid confrontation stemmed from a fear that once I presented an issue to one of my employees, he or she would simply deny it, argue with me, or make excuses. I didn’t know how to deal with that (besides completely giving in and saying, “OK, try better next time”).

I’ve found that the key to this is preparation: Turns out, confronting someone is easier when you have plenty of documentation to prove your case. It’s not enough to say, “Hey, I’ve noticed you seem a little less productive lately,” which comes across as vague and can garner rebuttals like, “I know—everyone’s workload has been light this week.”

On the other hand, when you have data to back up your points, you can let the information speak for itself. So, maybe you show a decline of the employee’s productivity in comparison to his or her teammates, or compile a few emails from less-than-satisfied clients that he or she has been working with. As long as you have firm examples to point to, you’ll be able to minimize backfire from your employee—and that will make your confrontation a little easier.

4. Realize You’re Not Being “Mean”

One of my early (and most naïve) arguments against confrontation was that I felt like I was being mean toward my employees—like I was nitpicking or micromanaging, or that if I just left it alone, the problem would go away on its own.

But consider this: If your job requires you to turn in a report every Monday, and you don’t turn in a report on Monday, you’re not doing your job. And in that situation, would it be mean or
unfair of your manager to sit you down to let you know that missing a deadline is unacceptable? No—in fact, you’d probably expect it.

Sometimes, when I need to confront my employees, I have to remind myself that holding them accountable for their work isn’t mean or unfair; it’s my job. And truthfully, your employees expect—and benefit from—that kind of tough love.

Nothing will be the magic cure to suddenly make you enjoy confrontation. For me, it came down to changing my approach and getting in the right mindset—to realize that I wasn’t being harsh or unfair to my employees by confronting them; I was doing them a disservice by refusing to.

This article was originally published on The Daily Muse.

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