

Communication Strategies for Tackling Tough Situations

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& past issues



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OF EFFECTIVENESS

BOARD GOVERNANCE

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP
(CEOs)

MISSION AND STRATEGY

MANAGING AND LEADING

PEOPLE MANAGEMENT
AND CARE

RESOURCE
DEVELOPMENT

COMMUNICATIONS
AND MARKETING

SYSTEMS AND
CAPACITY BUILDING

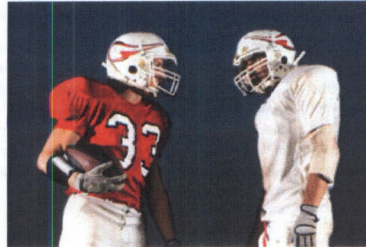
FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT

LEGAL AND TAX

EMERGING ISSUES

Communication Strategies for Tackling Tough Situations

By Amy White



One of the greatest challenges in a leadership role is dealing with people. Often our greatest joy and greatest pain results from interacting with one another. Unless you operate from a solid foundation, your emotions can get the best of you. Through the teachings of Scripture and the examples of Christ and Paul, we are taught that every human being is to be treated with dignity and respect, simply because we are all God's creation and made in His image. Secondly, we are compelled to do what is right, requiring discernment via consulting Scripture and the wise counsel of mature Christians. Finally, we are called to edify one another, including those folks who are the most difficult and whose behavior is most unattractive. *"Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."* (1 Thessalonians 5:11, NIV). We will all have experiences that put these principles to the test.

Challenging employee situations include those extreme cases that require careful analysis, planning, and expert execution as well as the more mundane day-to-day occurrences that are seemingly more trivial in nature. For example, Susan walks into her manager Jeff's office. *"I can't get my work done because of their need to party all the time!"* She complains that her coworkers are too chatty and disruptive. Jeff investigates and discovers that everyone was congratulating a fellow staff member who just got engaged. He returns to the office to tell Susan that sharing in one another's joy is part of creating a positive work environment and she needs to be more of a team player. Susan leaves in a huff and Jeff puts his head in his hands. He has a lot on his plate and is tired of dealing with Susan's intolerance. Does this sound familiar?

One of my all-time favorite scenes is from CSI Las Vegas. CSI Warrick Brown is working a case and developing feelings for a person of interest. She is suspected of using drugs. Warrick's coworker calls him on his poor judgment, which results in a physical altercation. Warrick ultimately sees the light. The two love birds are standing on a balcony under a moonlit sky. The conversation has a romantic tone to it until Warrick lifts the young woman's arm. After identifying track marks, Warrick looks into her eyes, says, *"Life is too short,"* and walks away.

I love this scene because it demonstrates the complexity of relationships, the significance of identifying the core problem, and the courage to confront and set boundaries. All these are critical in the work environment and when applied correctly, can eliminate wasted time, frustration, loss of productivity, and even turnover. It's not so simple to implement in a work environment when we consider the different types of personalities we encounter. The leader is often tasked with figuring it all out and producing a win/win situation for everyone. Let's look at some examples of how a leader can effectively deal with some of the interesting personality types at our places of work:

The Perpetual Victim:

Her favorite saying: *"It's just not fair."* An employee expresses that she is upset with her manager but doesn't want to talk to the manager directly. You ask her, *"What do you think will happen if you go to her with your concern?"* What follows is a long list of excuses and an unwillingness to follow through on your request to deal with the issue. In dealing with the victim, her learned helplessness and resistance is perhaps the greatest barrier to helping her to resolve her issues. Now what?

The first step is to help her see that she is contributing to her own problem. Somewhere along the way she has bought into a victim mentality: *she is helpless to change her environment; she has no hope of being heard and understood; and she is always 'wronged.'* Chances are she won't even be aware that she has internalized and is living out the persona of the victim. It will be helpful to describe what you see: *"You have all these feelings and issues, but you don't want to do anything about it. That leaves you powerless and the problems will continue."* This conversation alone won't be sufficient to effect change. You will need to direct her to take steps to confront her concerns and possibly even practice role playing scenarios with her to boost her skill level. You will also want to explore her concerns so as to identify whether or not there are legitimate issues that are also creating barriers to her moving forward. Make certain to affirm every step she takes so as to build her confidence and assure her that you are a resource to her and will support her initiative to be more empowered.

The Negotiator:

His favorite saying: *"I know you said to do it this way, but how about . . ."* (fill in the blank with his newer, better, smarter alternative). He's done it again—bypassed a procedure, skipped a step, crossed a line. The negotiator struggles to follow policies and when confronted with his noncompliance will often respond with a compelling argument as to why he did what he did, how his motives were good, and after all, how it did produce positive results. His autonomy will be the greatest barrier to moving ahead.

When you've persuaded him that he will not win you over to his view of reality, he will most likely become broken and contrite. Unfortunately, this acknowledgement will not produce permanent change. You will need to fully describe the cost of his behavior on the organization: financial, legal,

and impact on staff cohesiveness. Then, describe in black and white the consequences he will face if these patterns continue needs to be clearly articulated. If you really want him to make it over the long haul, someone will need to monitor his behavior and give him regular feedback to keep him in check.

The Intimidator:

Her favorite saying(s), *"You should have; You didn't . . . ; You did what?"* Her facial expression is stern, eyebrows are raised, tone is intense; she moves in close to others as she crosses her arms. People shudder when she calls, cringe when they hear her footsteps, and when she's present, won't even offer opinions in a meeting. Those on the other end are aware something is uncomfortable but may not even be able to pinpoint exactly where the problem lies. There may be lots of reasons behind the intimidator's behavior, but you're not going to fix that! The intimidator loves to be in control and accomplishes this by keeping people off balance through criticism and various forms of manipulation.

These patterns will fall somewhere on the continuum between blatant and very subtle. The best approach with the intimidator is to concretely describe the behaviors the intimidator uses that offend others and cause people to shut down. She will also need to learn how to read the signs that others are responding to her in a negative fashion. You will need to keep any emotion out of your training/feedback. (Once the intimidator has successfully tapped into one of your hot buttons, she wins). You also need to teach and empower staff how to appropriately handle her by learning how to describe what she is doing that is making a negative impact. If they give her power over them, now you have the intimidator to deal with and those who have fallen into a victim mentality.

Mr. Slow Mo:

His favorite saying is: *"I'm working as fast as I can!"* While this person can pick up the pace when the pressure is on, he seems to always return to his baseline. It's almost as if there is an internal clock that can't run any faster except for occasional bursts. What do you do if someone can't keep up the pace? You need to explore:

§ Is the employee capable of doing the work? God calls us in accord with how He has gifted us.

§ Does he enjoy the work or is he just putting in time-does he see her work as a job or a responsibility?

§ Has he received the right training?

§ Are there communication barriers between the employee and the manager?

There is a range when it comes to productivity that is acceptable. Not everyone will be a star and we all know we need strong bench players. If someone is doing the job well but is being compared to someone who hits the ball out of the park, a false interpretation of job performance may occur.

Ms. Anxiety:

Her favorite saying is: *"Oh, that's a problem."* When introducing change, she complains before you finish your first sentence. As much as the entrepreneur loves change, the person who does not like change will never invite it. There is grumbling for a week behind her computer screen. Change is not an opportunity for growth, it is the enemy!

Preparing this person for change is critical. Start by describing why the change is needed and the proposed solution. List the benefits. Whenever possible, invite feedback. (When people feel included in the process, resistance is often less). Once finalized, give an outline of the process with instructions to review the changes. Meet together to review it again. Provide the necessary training. Once the decisions are made and the preparation for change is complete, draw the line in the sand as far as any more negative comments or resistance.

Conclusion:

Some folks bring a lot of baggage into the work environment. In these cases, the Christian leader blesses the employee by proceeding with care, reflecting the behavior of our Servant Lord described in Isaiah 42:3: *"A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."* One woman with performance issues came into my office to talk about her struggles. She ended up sharing her experiences with a critical father. She said she had life-long struggles with strong feelings of incompetency. Subsequently, on the job when she felt the pressure to increase her performance, she became frozen by fear that she would not succeed ultimately proving she was inept and a failure. In these types of cases, referring someone to an outside resource for counseling may prove to be a wise option.

No matter what personality type you are dealing with, there are critical ground rules that contribute toward positive outcomes:

- 1) Take on the role of servant leader – pray with the person and also communicate your goal is to help the person succeed.
- 2) Fully explore all sides of an issue; give the benefit of the doubt before drawing conclusions which may be false. *"He who answers before listening, that is his folly and his shame."* (Psalm 18:13, NIV)
- 3) Identify the real problem vs. the symptoms – be a Warrick Brown and deal with the heart-of-the-matter rather than getting bogged down in that which is irrelevant.
- 4) Respond – don't react.
- 5) Focus on behavior – not attitude (behavior can be described, attitudes are subject to personal interpretation).
- 6) Describe the impact.
- 7) Come to one accord as to the solutions and goals.
- 8) Be willing to let someone pursue new job opportunities if they cannot comply with expectations.

When we take on the role of servant leader and seek God in attempting to effectively manage even the most difficult personalities, we will reap the rewards. *"The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace."* (Psalm 29:11 NIV). When staff feel heard, understood, and have an advocate who invests in the well-being of the individual, team, and organization, everyone wins!