

Heart to heart

‘Know-it-all’ employee needs ‘crucial conversation’

Question:

I look forward to your columns in *Small Business Times* and find them helpful in many ways. Here is a problem that I haven't seen you address yet. I own a small firm with just six employees and a full-time office manager/secretary. My problem is we have a new, young team member who thinks he knows it all, even though he has only been out of school for a year and is just now feeling his way in the real world. He gets a kick out of quoting textbook jargon even to the other members of our team who are more seasoned than he is. Since he is a hard worker and makes a genuine contribution to the firm, we are reluctant to come down too hard on him for fear of suppressing his high energy and motivation. I feel confident that he will eventually grow out of this know-it-all atti-

tude, but how can we hurry the process along? Thanks.

Answer:

Your young employee is suffering from an interpersonal blind spot. That is a common communication pitfall that impedes his ability to make authentic connections with the people around him.

In basic terms, he does not see himself the way others see him.

He feels the need to demonstrate his state-of-the-art knowledge when he talks with his colleagues. While he may simply see this as being fact-based and accurate, you and the others he talks to feel like you are being talked at rather than with. You feel like you are attending a college lecture.

This is where the rub occurs. You and your young employee are both part of the same conversation, but you are taking away different perceptions of what is going on. As the sender of the message, he seems to be noticing only his position. He is not taking into account your position as the receiver. As a result, he is not adjusting his presentation and message to take into account that the person with whom he is speaking is a seasoned professional.

He is not doing any checking along the lines of, "I'm talking with an experienced veteran, she knows these concepts/methods/issues. I don't need to recite chapter and verse with her. What I'll do here is ask questions based on what she is saying and play off of her comments by reinforcing her remarks."

Now that we have analyzed your situation, what can you do about it? Well, it's time for the two of you to sit down and have a crucial conversation. "*Crucial Conversations*" is a wonderful book by Kerry Patterson and her colleagues that has

received much attention the last couple of years. In it, the authors take the position that a crucial conversation is "a conversation between two or more people where stakes are high, opinions vary and emotions run strong." This definition seems to fit your situation pretty well.

One of the techniques they discuss is relevant to your situation. It is called "CRIB." CRIB is an acronym that stands for:

Commit to seek mutual purpose.

Help your young employee see that the mutual purpose for the two of you is forging a more constructive communication climate, one that is mutually beneficial and reciprocal.

Recognize the purpose behind the strategy.

You want him to tone it down. He wants to impress you with his technical knowledge. These are different points of view. The common ground here is the desire to have constructive, practical conversations that reflect an eye-to-eye, collegial posture. When that becomes the explicit target and that end is achieved, he will have toned it down and you will be impressed.

Invent a mutual purpose.

Identify the longer term, strategic purpose that will be served by adopting a new approach. In your case, this may be a desired future state in which he fulfills his potential and is operating as a trusted, valued member of the firm who takes on increasingly responsible assignments while offering a collegial posture to those around him.

Brainstorm new strategies.

Think about options for handling the situation differently in the future. This means helping your young employee see

the way toward adopting different communication strategies. He needs to see that he does not have to sound like a college textbook every time he opens his mouth. Besides rattling off reference citations, there are other things to say and different ways to say them. Plus, there are other communication modes that may be adopted, including listening, which can go a long way toward defusing the perception that he is a know-it-all.

It is worth noting that crucial conversations need to be entered with a set of realistic expectations. Expect to invest some time and effort and be prepared to initiate the process. Like any other strong relationship, a solid foundation of mutual trust and understanding will provide for the most positive outcome.

By the way, one discussion is not going to result in a miraculous change in his communication style. That will happen over time. So, in that sense, one crucial conversation may lead to another and another, etc. The point is that you are adopting an assertive, relationship-centered approach. That is better than ignoring the situation, complaining about it, arguing about it, etc.

Finally, be sure to offer sound feedback in your conversations. Be descriptive by focusing on observable behavior. Be specific by offering concrete examples and particular instances. Consider the receiver's needs by taking into account his or her background, experience, skills and abilities, current situation, future plans, etc. Direct the feedback toward the behavior, and not the person, by reinforcing and offering constructive comments.

So, in conclusion, my advice is to be straightforward with your young employee.

Frankly, these are the kinds of valuable lessons that will serve him well for the duration of his career. Left unchecked, his communication style might actually become career-limiting. In my experience, expertise gets an employee in the elevator car. In many cases, though, just how far that elevator car rises is more a function of interpersonal skills.

Engage in a crucial conversation in order to help your employee rise.



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