Managing your anger when your personnel test your patience

By Cynthia J. Young

Managing people can be one of the most rewarding parts of leadership, but it can also be one of the most frustrating. Missed deadlines, repeated mistakes, poor attitudes, communication breakdowns and employees who do not follow through can test even the most experienced manager. The challenge is not whether you will get angry. You will. The question is what to do with that anger before it affects how you manage the situation.

When personnel issues become frustrating, reacting immediately can make things worse. A manager who responds while angry may raise their voice, send an email they later regret, make assumptions about an employee's intentions or turn one performance issue into a larger conflict.

Anger can also shift the conversation away from the actual problem. Instead of discussing what happened, why it happened and what needs to change, the employee may focus on how the manager spoke to them. The original issue is still there, but now the manager has created another issue to address.

Separate the person from the problem. When an employee repeatedly makes the same mistake, it is easy to start thinking, "They do not care," "They are not listening," or "They should know better."

Those assumptions increase frustration because you are no longer responding only to what happened. You are also responding to what you believe the employee intended.

Draw your conclusion but use facts and not assumptions. What was expected? What really happened? Were the expectations clearly communicated? Has the employee received the training, resources and feedback needed to perform successfully? Is this an isolated incident or part of a pattern?

These questions move the conversation from emotion to management.

Do not manage in the moment. Not every personnel issue requires an immediate conversation. As long as it's not a safety or ethical issue, you can step away from what's happening to calm down.

Give yourself enough time to think before addressing the employee. That might mean reviewing the facts, looking at previous conversations or documentation or deciding what outcome you need from the discussion.

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The goal is not to avoid a difficult conversation. It is to have a productive one.

Before speaking with the employee, determine the one or two points they need to understand when the conversation ends. If you enter the discussion simply to express your frustration, the conversation will go poorly.

Praise in public, but reprimand in private. Your employees need specific guidance and feedback when they screw up so they can fix the problem, and they need to be told when they do things right so they understand when they've done well.

Saying "Do better" is not helpful, and lecturing someone in public will not help, either. Instead, pull the person aside, explain the behavior you observed, the expectation that was not met and what the negative impact was in that situation.

Don't forget to praise your team in public as a group and individually for the great things they do. Connecting behavior to impact helps employees understand why the issue matters.

Remember that your actions are also being watched. Managers often forget that the other employees are paying attention to what's happening. Your team will notice when you lose your temper as well as your professional edge.

You can hold people accountable without losing your temper.

Personnel problems will test your patience. Strong management is not about never becoming angry. It is about making sure your anger does not make the management decision for you. ❖

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