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Use Employee Complaints to Coach Emotional Intelligence

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When an employee brings you a complaint how do you respond? Do you take sides? Do you try to fix it? Do you dismiss it? Do you give them the typical response of "Thanks for your concern, I'll check into it?"

Effectively resolving complaints involves two important steps. One step is to determine the nature and legitimacy of the complaint and what, if any action to take. Equally important is to assist the person making the complaint to find appropriate and constructive ways to respond.

A complaint feels legitimate and real to the person making it. Often, however, people don't have adequate self-awareness or skills to deal with their uncomfortable emotions, and lose perspective about their own responsibility to help make things better. This presents supervisors and colleagues with a unique opportunity to coach emotional intelligence.

Borrowing from my clinical practice, a technique I often use to help people understand their emotions and take appropriate action is the following exercise. Complete this formula:

I feel [insert your authentic feeling]

when you [insert observed behavior in other person]

because [explain how other person's behavior connects to your feeling]

I would prefer [describe what you'd like them to do instead]

You can transform complaints into coaching opportunities for greater emotional intelligence by attending to each part of this formula.

First, encourage others to identify and acknowledge their emotional response. Many people have an easy time expressing anger or frustration, but more difficulty differentiating embarrassment, anxiety, loss, fear, or grief. This is usually because they have not learned how to handle these emotions, or have not been allowed to express them at critical times in their life. For this reason, it is critical that you do not invalidate their feelings with comments such as "You have no reason to feel that way." These comments invite people to question their own feelings and resist being honest in the future.

Second, ask the person to describe the problem behavior without assuming intentions or motives. This paves the way for the fourth step ? requesting different behavior.

Third, help connect the offending behavior with the accompanying emotions. How someone responds to a situation depends on their values, experience, personality, and unique motivational needs. You can

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learn a lot about a person this way, and validate their experience without taking sides.

The final step is to make a request of the other person. It's easy to point out what we don't like about others, more difficult to ask for what we want in a non-attacking way. Guiding a person through this step does not endorse their suggestion or make a promise of action. The purpose is to encourage self-awareness and build their confidence to participate in problem-solving.

As a supervisor or colleague, you will be most helpful when you gently persist until all four parts of the formula have been identified and written down. You can start anywhere. If a complaint starts with an emotion, move to the behavior next, then the rationale, and finally the preferred alternative. If the complaint includes only the behavior, examine the emotions next, then rationale, then preferred alternative. The following example will illustrate:

Employee: "I can't believe that Johnson left 10 minutes early today when the rest of us were working on the project."

Supervisor: "How do you feel about that?"

Employee: "I was upset, obviously!"

Supervisor: "Can you be more specific?"

Employee: "Well, I felt like he didn't value our hard work and commitment to the project."

Supervisor: "Can you help me understand the connection between Johnson leaving early and you feeling de-valued?"

Employee: "Because it seems I'm always the one picking up the slack, and when others don't do their part, I end up with an unfair load."

Supervisor: "Thank you for explaining that to me. I know how hard you work, and how much others count on you. What would you prefer from Johnson?"

Employee: "I'd prefer that he stays until we are all finished, or at least acknowledge how hard I am working."

Supervisor: "Everyone wants to have their work appreciated. Would you feel comfortable sharing this with him?"

Employee: "Can't you tell him? You're the supervisor."

Supervisor: "I could do that, and I bet it would mean a lot more coming from you. Would it help if you write down the parts we talked about. I'd also be happy to facilitate the conversation between you and

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Johnson. In any case, I appreciate that you took the time and effort to process this with me."

Using this formula offers supervisors and colleagues a respectful way to confront inappropriate behaviors in the workplace while retaining the dignity of all those involved. Try it yourself, try it with your subordinates, try it with your colleagues.

This topic is available as a **Keynote** presentation. We will share this simple and powerful process for transforming employee complaints into an opportunity to coach for improved emotional intelligence, accountability, and responsibility for solutions.