

Counselling: some guidelines

Most team leaders have some difficulties coaching their employees, teaching them a job, or showing them ways of working more efficiently. When it comes to counselling, team leaders can have a tendency to avoid it ('it's really not my business') or to become an amateur psychologist and pry into their worker's personal affairs ('I want to help my people with their problems.')

Either extreme is wrong. To ignore them is folly, and to invade their personal problems can threaten your relationship and the trust that is so important to supervisor and employee alike. Here are some guidelines and observations to help you see your counselling role in perspective.

Your role is not to solve employee's problems for them. Only they can do that. You can help them gain an insight and develop a plan to correct the situation.

An employee with a disruptive problem is likely to feel uncertain, anxious, ashamed, or angry. If you cannot understand and be supportive of these feelings, then you should not counsel the person.

Your role is not to pass judgement or cause loss of face to the employee you are counselling. Try to remain neutral, non-moralistic, and shockproof. Employees need empathy and understanding, not sympathy and pep talks.

The more you listen, the more you will learn about the person you are counselling. This will enable you to assess the situation better and achieve the desired objectives.

The more you get employees to talk during a counselling session, the more they are likely to (a) take responsibility for their own behaviour, (b) know what to do in the future, and (c) feel better for having talked it out.

The immediate problem is often a symptom of something bigger. Your role is to help the employee learn how to deal with future difficulties, not just the immediate problem.

All counselling sessions should be conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Both of you must work toward an outcome that you each feel good about (i.e., a 'win-win' outcome).

The focus of a counselling session should be on the employee's performance and not on personality. Your role is to help them to improve their performance not to change their personality.

Your counselling should be conducted on an adult to adult basis, and not a parent to child basis. Avoid blame or censure or advice and the employee must have 'authorship' of the plan of action.

Make good use of open questions that get the employee to open up and express feelings as well as facts. Use closed questions to confirm feelings.

Your comments during a counselling meeting should serve to seek out more information ('searching') and to show understanding and shared feeling ('empathic') without being advising or critical.

Before any counselling session, answer these three questions:

What is the situation?

What are my objectives?

What is my game plan, or strategy, for achieving these objectives?

The climate should reflect mutual respect, acceptance of each other's view of the situation, and a desire to work to an outcome that you both find acceptable.

Counselling an employee with a performance problem is usually a high stress situation for both of you. Do not put off the discussion; delay only adds to the stress. You will both be relieved once you get the problem out in the open.

Approach counselling positively, indicate that you know improvement will follow. When you express doubt (in words or negative vibrations) that the employee will improve, you risk a self-fulfilling prophecy, they are likely to leave you with a 'what's the use?' feeling.