



tough talk

Successful managers are great handlers of stress. Even the best of breed, though, run into the occasional workplace challenge that creates more than the usual level of heartburn. How good are you at handling things when the going gets tough? To find out, imagine how you would respond to the three workplace challenges described in this article. Then see what workplace psychologists say about each.

HOW TO HANDLE STRESSFUL WORKPLACE PROBLEMS
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CHALLENGE:

JOE, ONE OF YOUR SALES PEOPLE, IS DRIVING AWAY CUSTOMERS BECAUSE OF HIS BAD BREATH.

SOLUTION: Talk about awkward situations! Few are as difficult as the need to discuss personal hygiene. For the moment, picture yourself in Joe's shoes. Wouldn't you take offense if your supervisor brought up this topic?

Awkward or not, this situation is one you'll need to deal with at some point in your career. Letting things slide won't do. An employee's bad breath can impact sales and cost your business real money.

So how can you approach Joe without creating undue anger? For an answer, we turned to Leil Lowndes, a New York-based communications expert and speaker.

"It's always difficult to bring up a topic that can cause embarrassment to your employee," says Lowndes. "But you absolutely have to take action quickly. After all, anyone who deals with the public must have immaculate personal hygiene."

For starters, Lowndes suggests selecting your venue carefully. The office setting typically employed for personnel discussions provides the requisite privacy, but may be too formal. "You may want to discuss this matter in a more casual setting such as a business lunch," suggests Lowndes. "Discussing other matters over good food can help break the ice." A lunch-time conversation that revolves around how the employee can further improve his or her performance can naturally be extended to a matter that affects how the employee interacts with customers.

Approach the luncheon with the right attitude. "Stifle your own embarrassment by reminding yourself that you need to have this conversation for the good of your employee and your organization," offers Lowndes. Stay in control of yourself and think of the conversation as a tool for increasing communication skills.

Now, just how to bring up the topic? Lowndes suggests waiting until lunch is over, then casually breaking out a roll of mints you've secured for the occasion. Take one for yourself, then show the roll to your companion and offer to share: "I always take one of these to keep my breath fresh. Would you like one?"

The opening line avoids a direct confrontation while allowing your companion to pick up your subtle hint. In the best of situations, Joe will respond in the affirmative and ask if you had noticed his breath. This would provide your opening for a more direct discussion of how such a condition can affect his interaction with customers, and thus his career.

Come prepared, however, for an unpleasant alternative. Joe may refuse your offer and even take offense, responding with words such as these: "Really! Are you suggesting that I have a problem with my breath or something?"

Lowndes cautions against making any sign of embar-

assment or regret. Rather, immediately make your communication a little more direct. "We all need to watch out for ourselves," says Lowndes. "Even more so in our situation where we work in such close quarters and meet so many customers. We really need to make a good impression on them all."

By this time, Joe will have gotten the point, although he may be so embarrassed and angry that he expressed himself in a confrontational way. Allow him to let off steam. For your part, avoid responding in kind to any harsh words. Continue to emphasize that you are discussing the topic for Joe's own good, because a continued personal hygiene problem will affect his career.

CHALLENGE:

SHARON, A CUSTOMER, IS ON THE PHONE COMPLAINING ABOUT RUDE BEHAVIOR ON THE PART OF ANDY, ONE OF YOUR EMPLOYEES.

SOLUTION: Rudeness in an employee is inexcusable and we can all understand why Sharon is upset. Empathizing with Sharon, though, is not the same thing as dealing with her anger in a productive manner. In fact, expressing sympathy with a bromide such as, "I understand how you feel," may increase her anger level. The reason for this is that Sharon really wants evidence that you value her as a customer in the form of constructive action on her behalf.

Judith C. Tingley, a psychologist and president of Performance Improvement Pros in Phoenix, suggests moving right away to resolve any transaction that has been left hanging. "Go immediately to the subject of whether Sharon's initial problem was taken care of," she suggests. "You might say this: 'I will be happy to talk with you about Andy, but my main concern to you right now is the problem that you had asked Andy's help with. Was it solved?'"

"If the problem has been left hanging, try to solve it right there on the phone," suggests Tingley. Can't do that? Then say something like this, "Let me get this problem taken care of first and then I will call you back and let you know what happened. Then we can talk further."

At this point Sharon is already starting to feel better because you are taking physical steps in her behalf. When you call back to report what you have, chances are, Sharon will be far less angry and may well be flattered that you are going out of your way to serve her. At this point, Tingley suggests following up with a statement such as this: "Is there something else that you would like me to do relative to Andy's conversation with you?"

Sharon may say, "No, as long as the problem is taken care of, I am okay, but it still seems to me that such conduct by your employee is bad for your reputation."

You want to respond in a way that avoids accentuating the conflict with Andy while assuring Sharon you will take action to improve your staff's performance. So avoid saying that you will "talk with Andy about this." Instead, agree that your customer's interpretation is valid: "Such conduct is not the image we want to present to our customers. I cannot assure you something similar will never happen again, but we will try to work harder at our training."

Finally, conclude by making sure there are no issues left hanging that might cause Sharon to harbor bad feelings about your business. Express this concern in words such as these: "Is there anything more that you'd like me to do?" If Sharon still feels angry she may say, "Yeah, I would like you to talk with Andy about what happened." Then, by all means, respond in the affirmative: "I certainly will do so. I want to make sure all of our customers are treated well." Here you have communicated the fact that you will reinforce your business policies with Andy without making any statement that escalates the argument.

CHALLENGE:

SANDRA, ONE OF YOUR SALES PEOPLE, HAS HAD THREE POOR PERFORMANCE REVIEWS AND YOU MUST TERMINATE HER.

SOLUTION: Letting someone go is stressful for both parties involved. For advice on how to conduct a termination we turned to Jeffery P. Kahn, M.D., a Manhattan psychiatrist and chief executive officer of WorkPsych Associates, a consulting firm specializing in organizational behavior and employee productivity.

"The key to handling this situation is to be aware of what Sandra might be feeling and also what you might be feeling," says Kahn. Get a grip on emotions that will help you be more sympathetic and professional. That, in turn, can help to obviate any hard feelings in Sandra that may cause her to get back at your company through sabotage, lawsuit or just plain bad-mouthing.

Easier said than done? Maybe. Here's some help. Kahn suggests starting out by spending some time answering this question: "If I were Sandra and I were let go, how would I feel?" The idea here is not to read Sandra's mind—indeed, Sandra's emotions may be far different from what you expect. Rather, the goal is to better understand your own feelings, for they may reflect what you anticipate from Sandra. In turn, getting a firm handle on your own emotions will help you avoid saying the wrong thing in the forth-

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coming meeting.

Here's an example: if you'd feel angry about termination, then you may go into the meeting expecting to meet an angry Sandra as well. You may therefore conduct yourself in a confrontational way that benefits neither your employees nor your company.

"You don't want to end up saying in some words or other that Sandra is a bad person," says Kahn. "She almost certainly is not; she is just someone who did not perform to policy standards."

On the other hand, suppose you'd be afraid in such a meeting. You may well expect the same fear from Sandra and therefore express yourself in a hesitant manner. That's not good either.

Once you've understood your emotions, you will be better able to control your reactions to them and stay on point during the meeting. What's a good way to break the ice once the meeting starts? "Odds are Sandra knows something might be up even before she reaches your office," says Kahn. "So in many cases the easiest way to conduct the meeting is to ask a question rather than make an announcement."

You might start by asking her if she has thought about why you are meeting. Sandra is likely to respond in this way: "Well, I am afraid you are going to let me go." Then you can sympathetically agree with her: "Yes, unfortunately that is what this meeting is about."

Of course, Sandra either may not suspect a termination is planned or may not acknowledge it. In that case move on: "We are here to talk about your future with the company." That eases into the subject while

avoiding a sudden announcement that may be too much of a shock. At this point, you can cite the results of Sandra's last three performance reviews as evidence for the unavoidable conclusion that it is time for her to leave the company. Don't forget to remind her of any severance benefits, and to offer whatever help or support you can.

Getting in touch with your feelings, as we have seen, will help you conduct your meeting in a professional manner.

"Some people have said that emotional abilities are better predictors of business success than intellectual abilities," says Kahn. "A termination meeting is an especially good example of when that can be true." ■

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