

Confronting Drama At Work When You Can't Stand Confrontation

Bash Halow, CVPM, LVT

People say to me, “I hate confrontation,” to which I wisecrack back, “and you know someone who likes it?”

It's normal to dislike confrontation and if you're employed at a practice where you are expected to confront employees in order to sustain or improve performance, it's likely that your Check Engine light is on. Something's not right. Confrontation belongs on battlefields and in boxing rings, not in your veterinary workplace and certainly not behind the doors of your office.

I don't mean to say that you shouldn't lay down hard rules for workplace behavior and have clear, direct responses for people who transgress those rules. What I mean is that the process doesn't have to be tempestuous. On the contrary, enacting strong rules for behavior and enforcing those rules can be an opportunity to draw closer to your employees, not to fight with them. Still, a couple of things have to be in place.

You Have to Like The People Who Work for You

Despite your best intentions, every coaching session runs the risk of heating up. Remember that a job is your employee's livelihood; it's a source of pride and represents a kind of social status. This is where his or her closest friends work. Are they walking into your office with a bit of stress under their collar? You bet!

That's why it's critical that you only hire people that you genuinely like and believe can be great. If an employee senses you genuinely like him or her, he or she is less likely feel threatened, to hear what you are saying, and to not take a defensive position.

It also changes the way you talk and behave. In meetings with people you like, your subtext doesn't read, “and by the way, this is strike two,” rather it reads, “I care about you and I want to help.”

Enforce Rules You Believe In

I used to pussy foot around asking grumpy doctors not to be mean to staff members. I thought, “I can't do that, what if they get mad and quit?” But after years of seeing the toxic effects of employee hazing by doctors, I take a firm, immovable position on the matter.

Still, the conversation doesn't have to be confrontation, it can be fact driven and come from a place of caring.

“Listen Dr. Hades. I like you, but are you aware of how harsh you sound when you talk to employees? Are you aware of the impact you have on the people who work here when you get angry? How do you feel after you explode at an employee? As someone who cares about you, I can't sit idly by while you engage in a behavior that makes you feel lousy, that makes our employees feel lousy, that compromises our day, and that brings the whole place down. I want to have a conversation with you about why you are getting so mad and what you think demonstrating that anger is doing for you, our employees, or the problem at hand.”

I have a number of rules that for me are absolutes: “We can’t be uncivil towards one another”, “we have to be honest”, and “we have to genuinely believe in and want to be a part of our vision for a great practice.” I can enforce these rules without blame, shame or fighting because I viscerally understand their value... to everyone. Once a cop pulled me over for speeding well over 80 miles an hour. After he checked my information, he came back to the car and he told me that he had stopped me because he had helped clean up three fatal speeding accidents in that same corridor. He was firm and somewhat gruff, but I also got the sense that he was genuinely trying to save my life. Some 20 years later, I have never forgotten his warning. Who knows, perhaps he has saved my life, maybe more than once. If I’m going to be a cop at work, I’m going to be that cop.

Steer Clear of Rules Not Directly Tied to the Mission

What I can’t enforce are the rules that have no weight to them: “You’re not allowed to get a tattoo”, “You’re not allowed to use your cell phone”, and “You’re not allowed to use the Internet to look at Facebook... People, those horses are not only out of the barn, they are down the road and eating out of the neighbor’s yard. It is 2019. We are wired up to our eyeballs. Our entire lives are on our phones. If part of my job is to walk around your practice and look at browser history or watch your employees sneak peeks at their phone when they think I’m not looking, count me out. That’s a horrible job. It’s completely counter productive to the culture you’re trying to create and if I wanted to do that kind of work, I would have taken a job as a corrections officer. If you want me to talk about how any of the above is reflective of an employee’s engagement in their work, fine, that I can do. But that’s the only thing I’m going to predicate a worker’s employment on, not their latest plumber’s-crack tattoo.

Terminate With Compassion

Inevitably, you screw up. You hire that dream employee who doesn’t turn out to be so dreamy after all, but if you’ve followed the above rules, you’ve already had a conversation or two about the importance of living up to what your company is all about. If they haven’t drunk the Kool-Aid yet, they probably aren’t a fan of your kind of punch. In which case, they’ve decided to terminate their employment, not you. I say as much:

“Dennis, I told you on your hire date that I was excited to have you come on board, but these rules we have in place are part of our identity. If you don’t believe in them or don’t want to live up to them, you’ll never really be happy or fulfilled here. Find a place to work that’s meaningful to you. You deserve that.”

Confronting Drama At Work When You Can't Stand Confrontation Worksheet

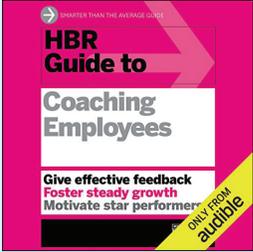
Bash Halow, CVPM, LVT

OBJECTIVES

1. Learn how to correct employee issues without confrontation.
2. Learn how major companies are reshaping the review process to be more effective.
3. Explore the emotions and thoughts of employees during coaching and reviews sessions as a way to learn how to conduct such sessions more effectively.

TOOL KIT

AUDIBLES AND ARTICLES:

Harvard Business Review Want Your Employees to Trust You? Show You Trust Them	Harvard Business Review How to Manage a Toxic Employee	Harvard Business Review How to Make Employees Feel Like They Own Their Work	Harvard Business Review How Leaders Can Push Employees Without Stressing Them Out	
---	--	---	---	--

TEAM EXERCISES (All available through Halow Consulting)

1. Front Versus Back
2. God I hate doing this
3. Last Time I Had a Great Day At Work

CIVILITY GUIDELINE EXAMPLES

1. **Sample Civility Statements**
www.sjcc.edu/PresidentOffice/Documents/Sample_Civility_Statements2-1.pdf
2. **Ryerson University Civility Guidelines**
www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/hr/equity/docs/guide-to-civility.pdf

Notes