Responses That May Occur . . .

Being confronted with unacceptable behavior is difficult for anyone. A supervisor needs to be prepared for a variety of responses, including:

Anger/Intimidation:

Employees may determine the best defense is a good offense and become belligerent and hostile, raising their voices or insulting the supervisor. The best response is to let the employee vent, paraphrase his feelings and demonstrate that the matter is a serious one that you will not be cowed out of handling. For example, the supervisor may want to say, “I understand that you are angry, and that you believe you have been treated unfairly. It’s important that I understand your perspective, but it’s difficult for me to absorb the information when you are so upset. This is an important matter. Let’s take a break, and get back together at 3:00 p.m. to continue our discussion.”

With the increasing prevalence of workplace violence, no supervisor should be required to remain in a situation where s/he feels personally threatened. That is one reason that Human Resources should be present for disciplinary meetings and terminations. In such cases, depending on the severity, Public Safety may be called to be in close proximity.

Tears/Emotional Despair:

Another common response to criticism, even when constructive, is a tearful display. Again, the response should be respected as genuine. Many times it is sufficient to simply observe, “I see you’re very upset, and I understand these issues may be difficult for you to discuss. Would you like to stop for a few minutes?” Most employees choose to go on.

Complaining/Blaming:

These are the employees who have never done anything wrong, but they can very readily identify others who have. It is most effective with these employees to name their behavior specifically. For example, “Beth, I understand that you believe that this problem was more due to someone else’s behavior—or that others have engaged in the same behavior without consequence—and I am willing to hear more about that later in our discussion. For now, though, I am focusing specifically on your own behavior. What could you have done differently? What specific actions can you take to ensure the problem does not recur?” For employees who still stubbornly refuse any accountability, it sometimes helps to observe, “It troubles me that you feel helpless to affect this outcome. Is that a feeling you have often in this position?” No one likes that description.

Silent Treatment:

Ask open-ended questions to get them talking, or provide a simple invitation to conversation. “Tell me what happened from your perspective…” Allow the silence to work for you. It is very uncomfortable for humans to be silent with one another and chances are the employee will begin speaking after a short interval. If he does not, again, it is appropriate to observe that behavior:
“I’d like you to respond to my questions, but you’re not. Why is that?” When the person does speak, practice active listening.

**Not Willing to Resolve:**

If an employee is simply unwilling to agree to the problem, or a solution, it is important that the situation is not abandoned. Instead, make expectations clear to the employee, close the meeting, and reschedule. “It is essential that we reach an agreement on how to proceed. It doesn’t appear that you are willing to do that right now, but perhaps some more time to reflect on the options we have discussed would be helpful. What time are you available tomorrow to resume our discussion?” It is important that the employee understand that this is not an exemption from dealing with the issue, but a deferral. If necessary, the supervisor may need to say something like, “I would really like to resolve this issue and come up with an action plan based on input from you. I need to tell you, though, that it is essential that a resolution be achieved, even if it is one I need to identify unilaterally. If we’re unable to reach an agreement this week, I will notify you of my decision and expectations for the future in writing.” Then, at least, the supervisor can establish that the employee had the opportunity to participate in the problem solving process, and cannot later claim that his exclusion was unfair.

Again, the key in many cases to performance management is distinguishing the person from his behaviors. Honoring an employee’s right to be treated professionally, courteously, and respectfully aligns equity on the side of the supervisor, and allows the relationship to survive the problem. In the end, employees and supervisors succeed or fail, together.