



UNIT-2

Preventing Problems

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Find new and effective techniques for dealing with difficult people.

Unit 2

Preventing Problems

Overview

The Importance of Empathy

We can do a lot to keep problems from happening in the first place. If you develop your empathizing skills, you can put yourself in the other person's shoes even though you do not have to agree with them. If you are practicing being empathetic (and we recommend that you do) you should avoid phrases like, "I agree" or, "Yes, that's true." Don't reinforce a concern, either. You can simply express your empathy by rephrasing the key topic of the person's statement.

Some phrases you might use include:

- "I hear..."
- "I understand..."
- "I think you're saying..."

The concept of rephrasing before answering gives you:

- A chance to empathize with the concerns
- An opportunity to show the person that you understand the concern
- A moment to think of an appropriate response

It's also important to check to be sure the individual is satisfied with your level of understanding or your explanation. Your ability to empathize will play an important role in your overall communication skills and your ability to foster a positive and productive environment.

Dangerous Misconceptions

Although we believe that we are being clear when we speak, we're not always being as efficient as we think. Here are some important misconceptions for you to keep in mind when you are having a conversation:

- People always pay attention when you are speaking to them.
- When people say they are paying attention, they really are.
- When someone says "I know", they really do.
- Saying something over and over will ensure that your listener understands.
- Saying something over and over, slowly or loudly, will be even more effective.

Getting Focused

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Despite our best efforts and our good use of management techniques, our attempts can seem to be for nothing. Behaviors we thought we had influenced positively (or corrected altogether) can regress.

For example, you might have spoken with an employee about some below-par behavior: perhaps they are always late for work, despite the fact that they are supposed to be answering phones and greeting visitors promptly at 9:00 a.m. You've spoken with the employee, and although this will lead to improved behavior for a few days, he always slips back to being late. You've asked your human resources consultant to suspend the employee, and they have indicated that punishment is too harsh, despite your record keeping that shows how often and how bad this behavior is.

You've been braver than plenty of workplace leaders because you have discussed the problem with the employee and with HR. But somehow, the behavior continues, and you get a sense that you are not doing enough.

What's Missing?

You aren't getting to the heart of the problem. It's not enough to tell the individual that they are breaking the rules, or that a colleague has to cover their tasks when they are late. If it were enough, the behavior would stop.

Ask yourself what is really bothering you to get at what is really bothering *them*. Often the behavior touches a nerve that is much more personal. For example, if I hired the receptionist because he was the son of a friend, and I felt that he was taking advantage of my relationship with him and his parents by not caring about the schedule, that's at a much deeper level than just the rules that are being broken.

If the person is perpetually late because they do not set their alarm (and get up to it) because they really do not care about their job, or they feel underutilized, or they are being bullied by a co-worker and cannot drag themselves into the office, then we are getting at the root of the real problem.

If, as leaders, we are content to only deal with the surface issues, and we are afraid to dig and get at the deeper issues, we will not create a better workplace. We simply scrape the moss off of the surface, only to have it to grow back later.

The ability to peel an infraction back to its core takes patience and precision. Sometimes we don't do this because it can take time to uncover the real problem. We can often find ourselves in too much of a hurry to do this properly. At other times, our emotions get involved and we make the decision that we really don't want to go there, because we'll also have to deal with what is bothering us.

If you don't stop to think about the big picture, you'll end up either missing the problem, or going after too many problems at once. To stop yourself from being over-involved, you must be able to state the problem in a single sentence. If you make it longer, your conversation will lose focus as soon as it starts.

The Three F's

To get to the heart of the problem, evaluate the 3 F's: **facts**, **frequency**, and **frustrated relationship**.

Facts

What are the facts of the issue? Create a list so that you do not get sidetracked while you plan your conversation. Don't drag in other stories or unrelated issues that have happened previously. If you are talking to someone about tardiness, then stick to that and leave things like poor report writing, gossiping, or not taking care of equipment out of the conversation.

Frequency

Make sure you have a very clear history of the frequency of the issue. In this case, how often is the individual late? How late are they?

Describe the pattern like this: "This is the second time that I've called this to your attention. You agreed it would not happen again. Now I am concerned that I cannot trust you to keep a promise."

Revealing that you notice a pattern brings the history to the forefront. The history is important because repeated frequency erodes your trust.

Frustrated Relationship

If your real concern is about the relationship, but you only focus on the pattern, then you are not likely to get the change that you are aiming for. You have to discuss what is important to you in terms of the relationship. Explain that when they repeatedly ignore your expectations to be on time, they aren't just demonstrating a lack of commitment to the job. They are eroding your trust in them, your trust in their ability to do their job, and the possibility of being trusted with assignments in the future.

Comments like the following can be helpful:

- I feel like I cannot trust you to get the work done.
- I feel like I am constantly nagging you and I don't like to do that.
- I feel like I can't trust you to keep the commitments you make.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Preventing Problems, edited by Anthony Biglan, Margaret C. Wang, Herbert J. Walbergm,(2013)*
- ✓ *Preventing Problem ,edited by Robert Algozzine, Pam Kay,(2002)*