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Jeffrey Deckman

THE "CENTERING CONVERSATION"

**WIN CHALLENGING
CONVERSATIONS
WITH
THE MOST CHALLENGING
TYPES OF EMPLOYEES**

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Win Challenging Conversations with The Most Challenging Types of Employees

The most difficult employee for the conscientious manager to deal with is the unconscientious employee. One of the main reasons those folks are so challenging to deal with is because they don't play by the same rules as us.

For instance, as a conscientious manager you believe in being honest; making certain you have your facts straight and that you speak clearly. You also put a lot of effort into understanding another's perspective and that they understand yours as well. However, the unconscientious employee doesn't play by the same rules. In fact, they play by a set of rules which just happen to be the opposite of yours. Add to that the fact they often will use your rules against you and you have quite the challenge on your hands when you try to confront them when you find them doing things they shouldn't be doing.

Below is a comparison between the two styles:

The Conscientious Manager	The Unconscientious Employee
You seek to clarify	They seek to confuse
You speak clearly and measured	They speak in circles and rapidly
You respond to questions with answers	They respond to questions with questions
You answer any of their questions	They avoid answering any of yours
You are honest	They are manipulative
You value integrity	They don't and use yours against you
You are straight forward	They are passive aggressive
You are trusting	They take advantage of that
You want to solve the problem	They want to keep causing it
You want to find the problem	They don't want to get caught

You see, unconscientious employees are manipulators of facts, information, incidents and most of all of YOU. They have to be. Otherwise you would catch on to their unconscientious ways and begin to call them on them. They don't want that. It would mean their gig is up, their power is weakened, and that they would have to stop playing their game and start playing by your rules.

So here is how it may play out. They start doing their disruptive thing – whatever that may be. It could be they begin doing less work. They could be creating

discontent and discord through the team. Or they could become passive aggressive in dealing with you. Or they could befill in the blank.

You rightly suspect something is going on and begin trying to figure out what is happening. Meanwhile they are working hard at make sure you don't. They engage you in a cat and mouse game that you aren't even sure is being played. All you know is that something is not right, and they appear to be causing it or at least heavily involved. But each time you confront them you walk away confused, frustrated, doubting yourself or, worse yet, believing them.

I refer to these people as Eddie Haskells. (The female version is "Edna")

For those old enough to remember Eddie Haskell was a character in the 1960's sitcom Leave it to Beaver. Eddie was the neighborhood kid who was snide, snippy and shifty. He was always stirring things up and getting the Beaver or his brother involved. Then when things went badly he skirted away and the boys took the blame. The boys knew he was shady but the parents didn't know what he was truly like. This is because every time an adult showed up Eddie was well behaved; quite gracious and very complimentary especially to Mrs. Cleaver, the mother of the boys.

In the business world we say people like that "play up well." In other words, they show all their superiors their shiny side while all their colleagues see their dark side.

These types of people are not bad people. However, they are people who constantly employ bad strategies that are self-serving; purposefully counter-productive and which negatively affect and disrupt the performance and morale of those around them. It is for that reason they are liability to you and the organization and a big distraction and irritant to their co-workers who want to perform and don't want the drama these folks constantly create.

It is for that reason that it is imperative you figure out their game and develop a strategy that neutralizes them while empowering you in order to put an end to the shenanigans and to protect those around them from their toxic behavior.

What follows is a process I call the "Centering Conversation." I named it that because it is specifically designed to allow you to focus the conversation and center the individual onto the fact that you are on to what they are doing and that it is in their best interest to stop doing what they are doing or face clearly defined consequences.

It creates a wiggle-free environment that, when done well, they simply can't escape.

The Process:

Typically, when you confront an Eddie or Edna Haskell you will be met by one or all four of the following “personalities:

The Arguer
The Denier
The Avoider
The Indignant One

They will often start with one of these styles and switch fluidly to the others as necessary to keep from getting caught.

After having spent forty years in management including more than a decade as a leadership and organizational design consultant I have been exposed to some of the most intelligent and manipulative folks you can imagine. In time I began to learn their patterns to the point I was able to develop a strategy that goes a long way towards neutralizing their tactics and empowering you in a way that is very effective.

Below is a step by step explanation of how it works:

Phase One – Establishing the mindset and setting the tone:

1. Do your homework!
 - a. You can't go on hearsay
 - b. Be patient as you gather enough data and information that tells you they are at the cause
 - i. You will need to be confident in your position as they are very effective at denying and evading the truth. So you must “know what you know.”
 - c. Get confirmation.
 - i. This could include having “off the record” conversations with their co-workers who are being impacted to help insure your instincts are correct.¹

2. After clearly assessing the situation set the meeting - Be certain that you control this process from the beginning

¹ Be very careful to protect your source if you promise them anonymity and confidentiality. I have sometimes taken several weeks prior to bringing a situation to a head in order to insure the person who helped me could not be connected to me. Don't get this part wrong.

- a. Set the appointment in a space that is on your turf and on your timing.
 - b. Tell them you want to talk to them but resist all of their questions about the topic. Telling them it is about “something important to them” is a statement that empowers you and unbalances them.
3. In preparation of the meeting:
- a. Define your parameters
 - i. Know what you want the outcome to be. What changes are expected. Be specific and clear in your mind.
 - ii. Decide, and commit to, the consequences they will face if changes aren't made.
 - iii. Secure any approvals from upper management that may be necessary
4. Moments before the meeting:
- a. Center yourself before engaging them.
 - i. Commit to using your intellect and avoid acting emotionally
 - ii. Expect to be frustrated but resist showing it.
 - iii. Expect them to be frustrating and prepare for it
 - iv. Realize that they will use each of the four personalities to distract and dissuade you
 - v. Remember that you hold the “power” cards
 - vi. Engage them with confidence but avoid aggression.
 - b. Detach from how you think they should respond
 - i. Don't expect them to cooperate but respond (with a cautious eye) if they do.
 - ii. Beware of them agreeing to easily or too early.
 - c. Keep open to the chance they may be partially innocent
 - i. Avoid being too heavy handed or aggressive
 - ii. Know that even if you are right on several fronts but wrong on just one they will flip the conversation on you.
5. Begin the meeting by:
- a. Clearly and calmly telling them what it is that you are seeing and why it is a problem.
 - i. Do not expect them to agree
 - ii. Expect them to start playing the game
 - iii. Don't let them confuse you. (If you did your homework you already know you are 90% correct.)
 - b. While avoiding their attempts to distract communicate your perspective and why you have it.
 - i. Do not look for them to admit you are right only that they clearly understand your perspective. (Trying to get them to

admit you are right before proceeding unnecessarily empowers them to stop you.)

- ii. Make it clear that you see their behavior
- iii. Make it clear to them that it must stop
- iv. Make it clear to them the consequences that will be faced if the behavior isn't changed

6. Establish agreement

- a. Get them to acknowledge that they understand your perspective. (You are not looking for them to agree with it; just that they understand that you have it. Do not move off of this until they acknowledge the perspective you have of their actions.)
- b. Get them to acknowledge that they understand that the perspective that you have is not in their best interest. (Once again, you are not looking for them to agree with it; just that they understand that you have it. Do not move off of this until they acknowledge they understand it.)
- c. Get them to acknowledge the importance to them that your perspective of them or what they are doing gets changed.
- d. Make it clear that your goal is for the situation to cease and that you are totally committed to seeing it through; whatever it takes.

At this point in the process you probably will have received a level of acknowledgment from them that they "may be at the cause" of what you are seeing. If they straight out refuse to acknowledge any part of it terminate the meeting. Tell them there is nothing more to speak about and that you will begin developing a course of action that will insure changes occur.

This keeps you empowered and unnerves them because they realize they have no control and have no idea what is coming next. Remember: The tools of the manipulator is control and information. Remove both from them and advantage swings to you.

Phase Two – Influencing the Change

Once there is a level of admission you can take the next step.

Note: It doesn't have to be a full confession but it does have to be an acknowledgement of the situation and that they have a role in it. Until they get honest with you continue working on whatever disciplinary plan you need to put in place to eliminate the conditions.

At this point, now that you have established agreement, you should position yourself not as an intimidating inquisitor but more of someone who is trying to work out a solution that is what the company needs and allows them to stay employed.

Shift the energy from confrontation to cooperation and keep it there as long as they stay honest. If they fall back into manipulation and dishonesty your empowerment card is to terminate the meeting and begin developing the course of action that will insure changes occur.

1. Ask "Defining" Questions

- a. Ask them to define why they are doing what they are doing.
 - i. Seeking to understand their motives not only helps you understand their thinking
 - ii. It eliminates any question as to whether they are acting inappropriately at any level.
 1. Once the manipulator admits partial guilt the momentum sways your way
 - iii. It prevents them from resorting back to denying what it is they are doing. Advantage you.

2. Ask "Solution" Questions

- a. Get them to present their solutions on what could be done to solve the problem and prevent it from reoccurring.
 - i. Making them propose a solution is very effective at:
 1. Getting a solution that will work
 2. Giving you the ability to hold them accountable for the solution they created
 3. Prevents them from ever denying they were doing what they were doing. (It eliminates all escape routes.

3. Offer assistance

- a. Ask them if there is anything they need help with to solve their problem.
 - i. Remember to communicate that you are still a partner in their "rehabilitation" and not their enemy... as long as they maintain integrity.
 - ii. If there is anything that you could do within reason and professional boundaries, then it is both fine and appropriate to do so.
 1. Sometimes a person's actions, while being inappropriate, may be in response to a legitimate problem that is occurring elsewhere that has activated them.
 2. Honestly look for such incidents and address you find. However, be careful to do so without excusing their behavior.

4. Maintain clear boundaries

- a. Take responsibility for taking care of any contributing issues on your end.
- b. Hold them responsible for taking care of all contributing issues on their end.
- c. Do not let them pull you into a problem that is truly theirs to solve. Leave it to them to resolve it.
- d. Hold them accountable to change
 - i. Possible schedule follow up meetings to help insure progress is made
 - ii. Clearly acknowledge any progress that is made.
 - iii. Reward the positive behaviors you want with positive reinforcements

Phase Three – Encountering stiff resistance

This part of the process is designed to break through to any “tough cases” that insist on denying their actions and are intent on being disruptive. It is the last chance for you to help them save themselves.

This may sound rough or abrasive but tough is appropriate when tough is the right tool for the job.

5. Reveal the “Kill Zone”
 - a. Inform them that the ultimate destination they are headed for is most likely termination.
 - b. Make certain they know you are ready and willing to go there if they persist
 - c. Make certain they understand that whether they go there or not is completely dictated by their decisions and behaviors.
6. Stay detached from their emotions, dramas, excuses and stories
 - a. Remember that you did your research before you started
 - b. Don't be swayed by crocodile tears.
 - c. Trust your process, your gut and your truth detector
7. Be determined and focused on your goal, but be responsive
 - a. Firmly hold your ground, but respond if they begin to come around
 - b. Beware of being either too unforgiving or too forgiving too quickly
 - c. Don't forget their ability and propensity to manipulate
8. Be fully prepared to enforce the consequences you identified as being the Kill Zone.
 - a. Never state a consequence you are not willing to enforce 100% and without hesitation.

9. Remember that you are always teaching people the type of leader and manager you are. Your actions are being watched and witnessed by everyone on your team. Therefore, you are:
 - a. Teaching the antagonist whether they can bluff or bully you.
 - b. Teaching the others who are on your team whether or not you have the leadership and management skills to do your job.
 - c. Teaching yourself about your character and how you respond to pressure.

Conclusion:

No matter what system you may employ to deal with an Eddie or Edna Haskell it is never easy nor is it enjoyable. It is frustrating and draining. But as one in management it is imperative that you protect the company and your team from the damage that a passive aggressive, unconscientious employee inflicts on everyone.

I have found this process to be as effective at corralling these types of individuals as I am at following it. It takes some skill and practice and will test your ability to lead.

But once you learn it and begin to master it you will no longer be at the mercy of, or be out maneuvered by, one of the most challenging types of problem employees one can encounter: The Eddie or Edna Haskell.

For more information feel free to contact Jeffrey Deckman at Jeffrey@JeffreyDeckman.com