The Power of Language

The purpose of the conversation is for you to seek to understand so that you can accurately describe the situation from the perspective of the employee. This will allow you to very quickly build trust, provide a safe environment, and encourage the employee to open up to you. It requires you to listen carefully and check the facts with the employee to ensure you understand it from their perspective.

How do we usually respond? How might this be received by someone with mental health or addiction issues?

1. Minimize feelings (It can't be as bad as you think)
   - This tends to discount the employee’s perspective, and may shut them down.
2. Offer advice (If I were you, I would do ...)
   - This dis-empowers the employee from finding their own solution, and makes you accountable for the outcome.
3. Bombard with questions (Why do you think he said that? Did you ask about ...?)
   - Understand that mental health or addiction concerns can result in chronic internal questioning that may be exacerbated by this approach.
4. That’s just the way it is (Life is like that, just accept it)
   - This approach may remove hope in a time of vulnerability.
5. Pointing out the other side (Jane probably just meant ...)
   - Although you may be trying to provide perspective, the individual may interpret this as siding with the other employee.
6. Poor you (You poor thing, that’s so hard)
   - This can reinforce victim mentality and/or learned helplessness.
7. Armchair therapist (Do you think it’s related to the fact that she looks like your mother?)
   - You never know when you might trigger underlying issues.
8. Seek to understand (attempt to understand the feelings of the other employee)
   - Open response (this allows exploration of the employee’s perspective in a non-judgmental, non-threatening, and positive way)
   - Curiosity (this is an approach that one takes to be open to what the employee has to say)

Open responses

- Can we explore...
- Help me to understand...
- I would really like to better understand...
- Tell me more...
- Would you be open to sharing...
- This is what I understand...
- Let me know if I am on track...
- Here’s what I see (the facts as you know them – not opinion)
Fighting words

Certain words can contribute to a positive interaction, and others add fuel to the fire.

You, calm down, always, never & but

Examples

• You ... (implies blame and fault)
• You always/never ... (this implies a generalization that is unlikely to be true)
• You just don’t understand...
• Calm down (the employee may emphatically state that they are calm)
• Everyone says...
• We noticed...
• Can’t you ever...
• What is the matter with you?
• I liked your report, but I didn’t like the summary (the ‘but’ negates whatever came before it)

Example

You are being disruptive at meetings.
Vs.
Help me to understand why the meetings are upsetting to you.

Encouragement vs. Praise

Often people confuse encouragement and praise – praise is a verbal reward and only offered after a task is completed. When someone is unwell they may not have accomplished a task well enough to illicit genuine praise. Encouragement is focused on effort rather than accomplishment and serves to acknowledge the efforts of the individual. It is meant to motivate, meet a need for support and understanding, and keep someone focused on progress rather than discouraged by challenges or failure.

Examples of encouraging statements

• You are putting forth an effort
• I like the way you tackle a problem
• Since you are not satisfied, what do you think you can do so that you will be pleased with it
• I have confidence in your judgment.
• I need your help on ______
• It seems like you really worked hard on that
• You're improving in ______. (be specific)
• I see that you're moving along