
HAVE I TOLD YOU LATELY THAT YOU BUG ME?:

How to have difficult conversations with difficult people

by Lynne Eisaguirre

This article is an excerpt from Lynne's book: *Stop Pissing Me Off: What to do When the People You Work With Drive You Crazy*—

Sue is pissed! Her co-worker in the next cube clears his throat every ten to twelve seconds, every single work day, without fail. The noise is so loud that callers on her line ask if she is in the car with the motor running. Not one to suffer in silence Sue has made her feelings known — to her sister, her mother, her girlfriends, even the bartender at her neighborhood pub. Occasionally, she yells “Be quiet!” over the walls in the general direction of the guy who’s driving her insane, but nothing changes.

Complaints vs. Requests: Learn the Art of Winning, Not Whining

Why do we whine? Do we really think that it gets results? Psychologist Gay Hendricks believes that when the whining involves another person, we're criticizing because we believe agreements were broken. Our perception is that regardless of whether we've asked someone to do something or whether another person offered to do something, there was an agreement made and broken. While this is true, there is another truth, and that is that most of us haven't learned how to make effective requests in the first place. Instead, we complain.

Consider this common workplace scenario: A team leader wants someone on his team to develop a better attitude; so the leader has a number of conversations with the employee about the employee's bad attitude. However, nothing changes. The bad attitude still oozes everywhere. The team leader keeps talking; the employee keeps resisting. No surprise because the leader has failed to explain exactly what behavior he does want. Instead, he just keeps complaining about the employee's "attitude," a vague term that could mean anything.

Consider, for example, Isabella, a bright young Hispanic Director of a high tech company. The company requested coaching from me after she had several run-ins with lower level staff people who complained constantly about her condescending, harsh attitude. Talks with HR failed to change her behavior. The tech company really wanted to retain Isabella because she was brilliant at her work. They also feared they'd be slapped with a lawsuit if they canned her. When I met with the senior leaders of the organization, they summed up the problem in the same manner as the subordinates. Isabella was harsh and condescending in her tone. I listened to numerous examples of "he said/she said." Frustrated, I requested the performance reviews. They were similarly vague and unhelpful.

Moreover, they were so loosely done that it's likely they'd never stand up to legal scrutiny, despite the fact that they had allegedly been reviewed by the firm's

employment attorneys. The reviews were laced with subjective comments, including that her attitude was “condescending,” “brusque,” and “short with staff.”

The problem resides with the word “attitude”: it can have different connotations depending upon context. If you’re a punk rocker or a rap singer, attitude is everything. Labeling someone with attitude can be a compliment. However, when it comes to performance, attitude is anemic. It’s a word that generates confusion, caution, and a whole lot of nothing. It’s not attitude you’re after. It’s behavior. My client needed to learn how to make specific, behavioral requests, and so do you.

It’s not hard; it’s simply direct. In the workplace, you’ve got lions and tyrants and bores who will only respond to behavioral requests. Instead of asking them to change an attitude, you must make it a measurable, objective, observable behavior for which the person is held accountable. Take Isabella. Instead of talking about being harsh or condescending, I coached her to change the way she interacted. I gave her tools about what to say and do. Instead of approaching a subordinate’s desk, dropping a project on his desk, and barking orders, I coached her to hand off that project differently. She learned to introduce the issue differently, saying something such as “Do you have a minute to talk about a new

project? Is this a good time to talk?” “What’s your work load; do you have time to take on new work?”

Forget about attitude and deal with behavior. You’ll find it’s actually easier because it’s more clear and straightforward. If you are judging someone’s work ethic, level of engagement, or attitude, negatively, there are concrete, observable behaviors that are leading you to that conclusion. Spell out the expectations clearly, whatever the issue. Tell a chronically late employee that she has to come in on time. Demand that a person who is frequently having a good time on the phone to eliminate personal phone calls. Ask the Internet shopper to refrain from surfing. You get the idea. It’s simple. It’s direct. It’s unequivocally clear.

Every time you even think about complaining, pause and convert that whining into a specific request. What makes a request specific is that it is actionable. It is something the person can say or do. Anything else is too vague, is not measurable, and is unlikely to get the results you need. Whining does nothing except weaken our own mood and the moods of those to whom we speak. Even more important, whining doesn’t work.

Requests that Get Results

If you want to deal with any issue that has the potential to be emotionally charged, and you want to get results, try an approach that I call 1-2-3 Go!

Here's how it works:

1. Say something that implies understanding or appreciation.
2. Make a behaviorally specific (doable) request. (It has to be something the person can do or say, or it's not behaviorally specific.)
3. Add more appreciation and understanding.
4. Go away: do not nag, hover, or whine.

Let's go back to Isabella. There were several behaviors she needed to change, making it a more complex series of requests. One request might be:

1. (Appreciation and understanding) "I know how busy you are, but I need you to soften your requests to staff members. We appreciate how much work you manage to get done around here! You're one of our most productive directors."
2. "Before you ask staff to do something, would you please take the time to ask if they're busy, and if they have time to take on an extra project?"
3. "I know that this may seem like a picky thing to you, but, trust me; it will make a world of difference to our busy programmers." (understanding)
"Thank you." (appreciation)
4. Go away: do not hover or nag.

These requests actually produce results.

Of course, making these kinds of requests requires you to figure out what you want, something many of us dither about. You may know that someone bugs you, or that when you are around the other person, it's like oil and water, but you can't put your finger on what it is. Thus, you need to ponder and reflect on what it is and what reasonable change that person could make. Complete personality transplants are not an option! You have to sort through what behavioral, performance-impacting changes can be made and what are personality differences that you may need to understand and accept. Simply being annoyed by someone else's personality is not a sufficient reason for that person to have to make a change. Issues that affect your ability to perform, or your team's ability to meet their goals, are worth examining.

Again, focus on the specific behavior you want to change. It has to be something that the person could say or do that would actually make a difference in the outcome of our performance or the performance of your team or organization. If nothing that they say or do would actually make a difference in your own or team performance, then you need to stop and examine your motives and expectations.

You need to understand why a person drives you crazy. Is it something that "triggers" you? A trigger reminds you of someone or something in the past that

was problematic, traumatic, or associated with unpleasant memories. If for example, you were constantly criticized as a child and over compensated for that criticism by becoming a perfectionist, any workplace criticism may “trigger” painful memories and you may over react.

A trigger may also be something that reminds you of your own shadow side. If you’re constantly trying to hide or repress your own temper you may avoid or clash with someone else who has a bad temper. You all have a darker side of our own personality that your try to repress or deny.

It’s important that you don’t impose your own triggers or shadow side on your co-workers. You have no right, in our work life, to darken the doorsteps of colleagues with our own issues. If you’re struggling with such an issue, take action. Seek out a trusted advisor; access the confidential employee assistance program at your work, if it’s offered. Use a journal, see a therapist, talk to your doctor, seek out a spiritual advisor or get other assistance.

If you have decided that the issue that’s bugging you is affecting performance and that there is something the offending party could say or do differently, craft a specific request. Before you make the request, try role playing with someone you trust. Then, go make the request. Walk away and give the person an opportunity to make the change. Allow the person some time to change

the behavior. If the behavior doesn't change, return and repeat the request. If that still doesn't work, repeat three times before you raise the stakes and step up the action.

Here are some examples of vague requests and specific behavioral-based changes:

Vague

Stop bothering me!

Don't be rude to customers.

Don't harass the women.

Specific

I can't work when you stand by my desk talking. Please stop.

Greet each customer when they arrive. Ask how you can help them.

Please don't make comments about your colleague's breast size.

Consequences that Command Attention

Once you've repeated the request three times, you can shift to a higher gear. This involves adding consequences to your request. For instance, suppose you've asked your co-worker three times to stop using his speaker phone and disturbing your work. Suppose that he still is doing the same @#\$% behavior. Add a consequence to the sequences. The next request would look like this.

1. (Appreciation or understanding) “I know how much you like to use your speaker phone, and I appreciate that sometimes you remember not to do that when I’m working. I understand how hard it can be to change a habit.”
2. (Specific behavioral request) “I need you to remember not to use it at all when I’m in the office. Please talk on the phone instead.”
3. (Add consequence) “I’m sorry to have to take this step, but if it happens again, I’m going to have to talk to our manager about this. I simply can’t get my work done when you do this.”
4. (Appreciation and understanding) “Thank you. Again, I know how hard it can be to change and I appreciate you taking these steps for me.”
5. Go! Walk away. Do not nag, complain or whine.

Then, of course, if your colleague keeps using the speaker phone, you will need to follow through. The biggest mistake in this process is to delineate consequences and then not pull the trigger. It turns a consequence into an empty threat. When you implement the consequence and talk to the manager, use the same 1-2-3-Go! format. It’s your problem and you need to find a way to deal with it. A conversation with the manager might go like this:

1. (Appreciation or understanding) “Ms. Manager, I appreciate how busy you are but I really need to talk to you about Steve Speaker Phone. Do you have a minute right now?”

2. “I have asked Steve Speaker Phone to stop using his speaker phone three times and he keeps doing it. This is affecting my performance. I can’t concentrate and, as a result, I’m not hitting my targets. I really need you to talk to him and get him to stop.”

3. (Appreciation or understanding) “I really appreciate you handling this problem.”

4. Listen to any concerns they have and then Go! Do not whine, complain or nag.

Be sure to focus on the impact the person’s behavior has on your performance or the performance of your team. Remember, if it’s not impacting your performance, the performance of your team, or the organization as a whole, it’s not your manager’s problem!

Using humor to defuse situations can go a long way, as long, of course, as it’s appropriate humor. When dealing with Steve Speaker, for example, you might bring in a foam ball and playfully tell him that you’re going to toss it over the cube in order to remind him every time he forgets and turns on his speaker phone. Then,

just do it! You might also make a large, decorated sign that says: Lynne Is In! She Needs To Concentrate! Put it on his phone as a reminder whenever you come to work.

What if the manager doesn't respond or doesn't do what you ask? Then you need to repeat your request with her three times. By the way, this repetition works best if you don't whine, or complain about having to repeat. In fact, start fresh every time with a smile or at the very least have a pleasant look on your face. If you let your annoyance show, you've undermined your effort. Perhaps your manager has just been too busy to deal with the problem. Perhaps she forgot, or she was living in hope that the problem would just go away. It never serves you to bring up her lack of focus. People just don't respond well when you point out flaws. It's a sure way to put your manager on the defensive. Graciousness will do the opposite.

After three times, and only then, can you ratchet up the consequences. At this point it's a matter of diplomacy. You must analyze your relationship with your manager and ask yourself the crucial question: how important is it? You have three options. Drop it. Go back to your manager and tell her that if she can't/won't deal with it, you need to get her manager or Human Resources involved, or you can go directly to the HR folks and ask them to handle the issue discretely. The problem,

of course, with this kind of escalation is obvious. She may never forgive you for your end run.

One way to protect yourself is to e-mail your thanks to your manager every time you ask for her help, repeating, in that e-mail, what you requested and thanking her in advance for helping you with this problem. This technique serves two purposes: it reminds her and any higher ups that you did, indeed, do everything possible to try to get her help, and it also gives you a paper trail that you were totally reasonable and professional in trying to solve the problem.