

Careful critique

Be tactful when trying to change manager's negotiating style

Question: We are in the construction industry and have a project manager who is well-liked by his colleagues but despised by our subcontractors. His negotiating style can be best described as, "It's my way or the highway." We obviously want him to get the best price from the subs, but would like to tame his barbed-wire style. Any recommendations?

Answer:

For some people, changing their negotiating style is comparable to changing their handshake. Many consider it part of their identity. They take pride in their style, even when others are offended by it. You know the people who, when they shake your hand, either squeeze so firmly they crush your hand or feel like a slimy fish?

Before trying to change his behavior, first take the time to understand the beliefs or factors driving his actions. Why does he behave this way? Is it because he learned early in his career that intimidation is a quick and fast process for getting what he wants? Is it because he didn't learn how to negotiate, so he has compensated by being a tough guy? Or, was this a strategy other supervisors rewarded, so he wanted to please them? Identifying the driving force behind the behavior gives you key insights about how to approach the situation. However, you are not ready just yet.

Once you have determined his underlying motivation or belief system, the next step is to assess his trainability quotient. Ask yourself, is this person trainable, or is he a know-it-all who refuses to take counsel from anyone unless threatened with his job?

Think back to previous situations when new procedures or systems were implemented. How did he respond? Did he embrace the change and want to learn how to be proficient, or did he dig in his heels and resist changing his old ways?

Clearly, a person who embraces learning will be more receptive to receiving feedback and adjusting his style than someone who is threatened by new ideas.

The third step is to find out how the project manager learned to negotiate. Did he acquire his dog-eat-dog style by imitating a mentor, someone whom he trusted and respected? Or did he develop his negotiations prowess like most people, from the school of hard knocks?

Gathering this information up front before communicating your request for him to change will assist you in creating rapport with him. Keep track of the words and phrases he uses, so at the right time, you can strategically use them in your dialogue.

The last step is to prepare. Approach this situation as you would a potential sale. He's the customer, and you are the seller. How will you get him to make these changes without compromising his ego?

Begin by acknowledging the positive intention behind his tough guy behavior. For example, maybe he acts this way because he wants to get the best price without a lot of haggling from the subs (it takes too much time and undermines his productivity). That's great for you and your company. You might not like his approach, but you value his intention. Or maybe he wants to create a reputation within your team as the guy who gets the job done on time and within budget. Being tough is the only strategy he's ever known for making that happen. Helping him understand there are more effective options will be an important part of your discussion.

Next, determine what objections he will field during your discussion and importantly, how will you respond? You don't want him staking his feet in the ground, refusing to consider options.

Thinking through all of these issues before you meet with him is advantageous if you want to remain clear-headed. Rehearse how you will initiate the conversation. See it play out in your mind's eye. Stage how you want the conversation to flow. And see yourself responding to his resistance with calm effectiveness. Remember, it's never easy to be under the heat-lamp.

Keep these thoughts in mind as you play out

the scenario:

1. Do not to cast judgment, criticize or threaten him. This will emotionally distance him and may even anger him.

2. Ask "what" or "how" questions, not "why" questions. To illustrate, compare the inference of these two questions: "Jack, I'm curious. How did you learn to negotiate [with subs]?" vs. "Jack, why do you threaten subs when negotiating with them?"

The first question is seemingly neutral. Whereas the second question forces Jack to either defend his position or refute your judgment of him. Either way, he feels attacked. Emotionally, he's not in a place of wanting to please you, but rather to challenge you.

3. Listen more than you talk. Maintain a conversational tone in your voice. You don't want him to feel that this is an interrogation.

4. Be patient with this process. You might find your project manager takes pride in his negotiating style. Expecting him to change after the first meeting is unrealistic.

5. Be prepared to communicate how his behavior is negatively impacting the business. It's common knowledge people do more for others than they do for themselves. Therefore, if he comes to understand his behavior is undermining the company's well-being, this may influence his desire to change more than if he is doing this for his own benefit.

Keep in mind, change is easier for some people to embrace than others. Understanding the driving forces behind his behavior will give you tremendous insights that will help you strategize how to best approach the situation. Providing critical resources, including training, coaching and ongoing feedback, will ensure he is adequately prepared to make the necessary changes.



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