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## Professional Growth Articles



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## Delivering Difficult Feedback (*Part I*) When Immediate Correction is Imperative

March 2022

Next month (*Part II*)

When Significant Growth is Imperative



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or perhaps  
**A NEW ROLE**  
in or outside your  
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Feedback is essential to all of us and it is a skill. Many are not comfortable delivering feedback at all, let alone difficult feedback. As a preface, I'll refer you to a previous article I wrote, "How to Offer Feedback Constructively". Click [here](#) for a link to the article.

*I am an  
**experienced**  
**career coach.*** I work  
with folks early career all the  
way to C-Suite individuals  
seeking a new position or

This is probably one of my most direct articles. This topic came out of a coaching session with a client who, as a manager, had to deal with a serious performance situation. I realized, there are more of you out there who have to deal with this sometimes. Most feedback can be delivered gently and with coaching and encouragement for improvements leaving the employee with a positive feeling and a desire for growth. Unfortunately, there are times when a leader has to immediately deal with a serious situation that requires immediate corrective action. This is hard stuff and no leader wants to be in such a situation, but when you are, here are some thoughts and suggestions I hope will help you deal with it as well as possible.

## **What do you do when a direct-report has really botched something that is well below expectations, quality or standards for acceptable performance or violated mandated rules or regulations?**

If the performance is something that was visible and known to others outside your immediate team, presented a serious problem for others or violated safety, health or legal standards, the situation needs to be addressed swiftly and directly so it does not happen again. That's not to say you don't need to address it if it was only visible within your team – you just may have a little more time for coaching to improvement.

It is always good to consider the individual's personality to choose the right approach and, in this situation, regardless of which approach you choose, it is important that the message is delivered with kindness, clarity and directness so there is no room for misunderstanding.

Think in terms of the outcome you want from this feedback! There is no time for gradual improvement or trial and error in a learning process. There are clear standards that must be met.

Here are examples of direct statements you might use after you set the stage properly for the individual:

**Preface:** Yesterday, this is what happened. Be specific and clear. Check with the person that you actually have the correct facts. If you are arguing over what happened, the message will be lost. So clarify that first. This assumes you also have information from others or from your own

promotion, internally or externally, and those starting a new role. Let me share a little about the process I use to help you land in the RIGHT job and then start strong to show that you were the right choice!

***First,*** I will work with you to understand and help you get clear about what you want.

***Second,*** I am skilled at helping you uncover strengths and skills you don't recognize in yourself. I'll show you how to dig deep and raise your awareness of the value you bring to a potential employer.

***Third,*** it's not enough to recognize your value. I will help you develop your "elevator pitch" and learn how to characterize and communicate your value, skills and strengths in ways that cause networking contacts, interviewers and hiring managers to sit up, take notice and remember you in a very positive way.

***Fourth,*** I will show you effective ways to broaden your network and open doors.

***Continually,*** I will be a thought partner through your job search or promotion process and beyond. I will help you strategize for interviews, serve as a consultant in preparing for and negotiating job offers, and walk you through a process to prepare for your first days on the job and make onboarding a tool you use to fast-track your success in the first few months.

observations so you're not relying solely on the perspective of the individual whose performance is in question.

1. These are the ways that what happened does not meet our (standards, expectations, regulations, etc.)
2. This is NOT ACCEPTABLE because...
3. This did not meet the expectations we discussed in these ways or for these reasons.
4. This MUST NOT happen again.

**Be Prepared to Listen:** Be sure to listen to what the individual has to say. Sometimes there will be things you didn't know about. They may truly have misunderstood something. There may have been extenuating circumstances or reasons they thought what they did was appropriate. You will not know until you listen. That way, you have the opportunity to alter the plan before you present it or to take a little more time to think before you decide how to deal with the situation. Just leave the door open until you listen.

**The Plan:** So, here's how we are going to proceed...

Have a clear plan beforehand for how you want to deal with the employee to assure expectations will be met going forward. It could include things such as:

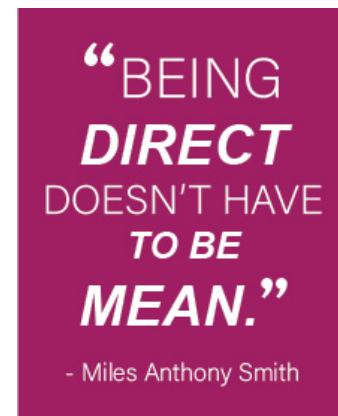
- Reassignment of responsibilities or position
- Partnering with another employee
- You, the manager, require check-ins with the employee at every step and even direct observation for a time
- Possibly, if appropriate, disciplinary action for which you have the authority

Now, here's the clincher! **How do you respond to their response?** That's what you really worry about, right?

Provided you are kind, clear, direct and your behavior is appropriate, not bullying, yelling or otherwise out of line because you're angry, then it is not your job to make them feel better!

Let me say that again – **Your job is not to make them feel better** however they may react to hearing tough feedback.

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If you go into this conversation with your head worrying about how they will react and how you'll deal with that, you're not properly prepared. Get your head in the right place. You have a job to do. If you worry that they'll have excuses, be pouring out their heart with sorrow, cry or be defensive or angry, then you are positioning yourself to be manipulated because they can maneuver you into trying to sooth them or feel sorry for them and you can end up watering down the message. It's not your job to mitigate how badly they may feel. Understand, I am not saying you need to be harsh or cruel in any way. If they understand they messed up badly and are cooperative, be encouraging, but don't say things, like, "It's OK", or "It's not that bad", or other words that water-down the message you just delivered.

## So how do you deal with those potential reactions?

### 1. They pour out their heart with sorrow –

"I appreciate that you are sorry this happened and I want you to put your energy into what you do next and how you will work to implement the plan I have described."

### 2. The defend and deny –

"What happened may not be what you thought was happening or what you intended. I understand that. How you perceive what happened may be different from my perception. Nevertheless, I need you to understand what happened does not meet expectations or standards. I want to know how you will work to implement the plan I've described and what you will do differently going forward."

### 3. They cry –

Hand them a box of tissues. Don't soothe them. Let them cry and don't fill the silence. Let them vent, cry or explain. When they have calmed down, you can agree that hearing difficult feedback is not easy. And, don't say, "BUT", which negates their feelings. Instead say, "And, the way you turn this around and get back to a positive place is to implement the plan I've described so this doesn't happen again."

It may also be good to suggest/request that this discussion is between the two of you and is not to be discussed with other members of the team. You don't want to have continuous

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drama within the team by this person going to every member of the team for comfort, to rally people around them or create other turmoil, plus it will not be fair to the rest of the team members to have to deal with this person about the issue. That is your role as the manager.

**Be prepared for a follow-up discussion. After a person has had time to think, they may have more questions or reactions.**

One more thing I want to say to you. It is your responsibility as a manager to make sure the expectations, rules, regulations and standards are clear up front. Goals must be made clear as well. If you have not done your part at the beginning, then you will need to accept some of the responsibility of someone not meeting those expectations. So, please take the time up front to set the clear standards for your direct reports. You may want to refer to my article "Top Down and Bottom Up Goal Alignment" for a good method of setting goals and expectations. That is also training that I offer to individuals, teams and leaders. Click [here](#) for a link to the article.

**If I can be of help to you, don't hesitate to reach out. A complimentary call with me is only an email away.**

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**Joy Conley Kacik**

Joy is a conference speaker, team and leadership development consultant, customized trainer and facilitator and a Certified Professional Coach with expertise in personal career coaching, job offer and salary negotiations and executive coaching.

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