



Coach's Corner:

How to deal with an emotional employee

How do you respond when someone gets so angry that they won't - or can't - carry on a conversation with you? In this issue of Coaches Corner, Sharon tells the story of a client who found a way to communicate with an enraged employee - and shows you how you can do the same.

"You're making me crazy!"

That's what I heard as I approached the office of my client, Parna. Moments later, Parna's newest employee, Doug, bolted out of her office, red-faced and indignant. "I can't work this way!" he shouted as he left.

When I got to Parna's office, she was seething.

"Another blow up from Doug," Parna said. "He was in here complaining - again - about the quarterly financial reports he does for me. He wants me - *and* the CFO *and* the president - to commit to doing just one round of edits on the reports. I tried to explain why that won't work, but he wouldn't listen to logic."

"Doug does great work," Parna continued, "But, every time we disagree about something, it ends with him storming out. It's too much drama for me. I'm starting to think that I might have to let him go."

What went wrong?

Without intending to, Parna made the situation worse by trying to have a logical conversation with Doug while he was emotional.

It turns out that human beings are not very good at thinking rationally when we're upset. When we're triggered, as Doug was by this conversation topic, our brains react as if we're in physical danger. Logical thinking is suspended and our focus becomes fighting or fleeing the threat.

"You're right that Doug wasn't listening to you," I told Parna. "He wasn't listening because he was feeling threatened and *couldn't* listen. In fact, the more you advocated against his one-round-of-edits idea, the more of a threat he perceived and the less able he was to think logically."

What could Parna have done instead?

One of the most effective ways of calming someone down is simply to listen to them. Listening involves three core skills: inquiry, paraphrasing, and empathy.

- *Inquiry* shows the other person that you care about their viewpoint. People are calmer when they feel attended to and understood.

- *Paraphrasing* shows that you paid attention to what the other person said. It also ensures that you understand their view correctly.

- *Empathy* helps create a connection between you and the other person, making you seem less threatening.

A conversation do-over

Parna and I worked together on her listening skills and then she spoke to Doug again. A transcript of their conversation follows, coded to show how Parna used inquiry [I], paraphrasing [P], and empathy [E] to calm Doug down.

Parna: Doug, I'd like to revisit our conversation about the quarterly report process. I don't think I really understand how the current report process is impacting you. I know the impact is negative, but that's all I know. Can you tell me more [I]?

Doug: It's totally inefficient. First, we go back and forth with you on a few rounds of edits. Then the CFO makes revisions, sometimes changing the things you changed back to the way we had them to begin with. Then the president makes revisions, sometimes changing what you *and* the CFO have changed! Then you get involved again and the cycle starts all over. We change it a million times before everyone is happy with it. It's taking way more time than it should and it's keeping us from doing other work that is important.

Parna: So you're doing multiple rounds of edits for three people, which is taking a lot of time and keeping you from getting other important work done [P]. I can certainly see why that would be frustrating [E]. Tell me more about how it's impacting you [I].

Doug: Well, because there are so many changes, I can't get the reports done during work hours. So, I bring them home and work on them at night - which is also when I'm helping my kids with their homework. I end up feeling like I haven't done a good job at either task. It's really stressful.

Parna: So, this isn't just a source of frustration during the day. It spills over into the evening and leaves you feeling like you're not doing right by your kids [P]. No wonder you're stressed [E]. I'd like to fix this. If we could create a report process that met the interest you have in doing this more efficiently, as well as the interest that the president, the CFO, and I have in generating the most up-to-date reports possible, would you support that?

Doug: Sure.

Parna: Great. Then let's spend half an hour tomorrow morning brainstorming ways to change the process so that it meets everyone's interests.

Doug: That sounds good. Thanks, Parna.

Summary

When dealing with an emotional employee or colleague, remember that they won't be able to engage in a rational, problem-solving conversation until they have calmed down. You can help them calm down by inquiring to better understand their situation, paraphrasing what they are saying to you, and empathizing with their distress.