

## Topic Nine – Diffusing Difficult Situations



## Coaching, Evaluating and Delivering Constructive Feedback – Learning Series

We are pleased to bring you ***“Diffusing Difficult Situations;”*** the ninth in a series of communications that discuss the value that coaching brings to your management practice and team leadership. The content presented will provide an overview of what it means to diffuse a difficult situation and offer strategies for resolving conflicts. In addition to this message, this topic includes a Language Worksheet discussing Aggressive, Assertive, and Deferential Language, a Job Aid to help you frame a difficult situation appropriately.

To reference previous topics, please click on the Coaching Series Home link located in the Quick Links section of this web page.

Thanks for all you do.

### Overview: Diffusing Difficult Situations

As a manager or supervisor, you may be called on from time to time to solve problems or resolve disputes that are directly related to miscommunication, cultural misunderstanding, or poor employee attitude. Pressures, whether outside or work-related, can result in behavior that is rude, uncooperative, or aggressive toward others. Intervening with empathy and respect can be challenging when emotions are running high and employees feel that they have a lot at stake in the resolution.

Many of the skills and strategies that are part of the coaching toolkit – such as active listening and the EARN feedback process – can be brought to bear on these situations. Other incidents will require more immediate action and possibly the involvement of Human Resources.

It is important to address difficult situations directly to keep them from growing worse and potentially affecting the morale or productivity of your whole team. The trust you have been able to establish with your employee in the coaching relationship will go a long way toward helping you approach, frame, and resolve an issue in a way that is both timely and respectful to those involved.

### Benefits of Diffusing Difficult Situations

The benefits of **diffusing difficult situations** are outlined below:

- Fosters an atmosphere of respect and empathy
- Supports a professional and productive work environment
- Retains the focus on the mutual goals of the office or department

## Keys to Diffusing Difficult Situations

When diffusing a difficult situation:

**Approach and assess the situation before acting:** Identify and interview the employee(s) involved in a situation before rendering judgment. Ask questions but avoid accusatory language. Listen with empathy and attempt to discern the motivation or cause of anxiety that underlies a behavior or incident.

**Be mindful of your own emotions:** Dealing with the conflicts of others can trigger an increase in your own anxiety levels, which can be compounded by the stress of deadlines and progress that is not being made while you are intervening in an incident. Rely on your active listening techniques and keep your tone and body language neutral.

**Understand the difference between aggressive and assertive language:** Aggressive language is most commonly characterized by an increase in volume and hostility. The use of aggressive language can quickly escalate a situation and should be carefully managed. When confronted with aggressive language remain calm and confident in what you're saying and try not to take the reaction personally. If you find yourself angry or upset, take some time away from the situation and revisit the conversation when you're both more ready to talk. Be careful to not confuse aggressive language with assertive language. While often used to express a differing opinion, assertive language is characterized by openness and honesty. Just because your employee doesn't agree with you, does not mean that he or she isn't communicating with a sense of honesty and respect. If you have a strong coaching relationship, assertive language is a healthy way of expressing dissent.

**Craft a mutual solution:** To repair and resolve a situation, there needs to be agreement about expectations going forward. Each party should be clear about their responsibility to avoid repeated problems and agree on strategies for developing a productive working relationship. In many cases, no formal documentation will be needed, but a follow-up email summarizing the situation and the agreements will reinforce the results of the intervention.

**Know when to involve Human Resources:** Often you will be able to manage difficult situations on your own. However, occasionally you may need to reach out for advice, counsel or support. Whenever addressing a difficult situation, ask yourself, "Is there anyone who can or should be made aware of or involved in this situation?" For example, if racism or discrimination is potentially a part of the situation – or if there is question that behavior might reach the threshold of a hostile work environment, it is imperative that you involve Human Resources and/or the Diversity Officer.

## Next Steps

**Activities:** For additional information on diffusing difficult situations, please take a moment to complete the worksheet, review the job aid and attend the 'Diffusing Difficult Situations' Role-play conference call referenced below:

- [Diffusing Difficult Situations Job Aid](#)
- [Aggressive, Assertive and Deferential Language Worksheet](#)
- [Aggressive, Assertive and Deferential Language Worksheet - Key](#)

**Coming Next: What's Your EQ?** Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace can be very helpful in developing and strengthening your coaching relationships and is the next topic in this series. It will provide you with strategies to manage the perception of your own and other people's emotions and the ability to positively influence those emotions.