

How Can I Communicate Consequences Effectively to an Employee?

This question gets at the very foundation of management skills. You want the other person to talk openly and honestly about a possible problem, and this requires that he or she feels safe. And yet you fear if he or she does talk openly, it could easily result in a serious negative consequence. How can *that* be safe?

Let's look at two elements of communicating consequences. First, can a person express his or her opinions without others jumping all over what he or she has to say? Will his or her ideas be listened to in an atmosphere of respect? Do you as the manager desire to learn, or just want to look good or "win"? Will the discussion be propelled along by the facts and merits of each argument, or by power, position, and politics?

People need to know that if they do open up, their comments will be treated with respect and listened to. We all make better decisions when the pool of ideas and points of view is filled with an array of thoughts, experiences, feelings, opinions, and theories even if different than our own. The employee must be given a fair hearing. This will help you make the best decisions.

But there's second element of communicating consequences that gets to the heart of the question: "But what if honesty may lead to negative consequences?"

The effective, admired and most productive organization is one where individuals are held accountable for the consequences of their own actions. It may be easier in the short run to avoid paying the consequences, but it is always better for the individual as well as the organization if people are connected to the consequences of their own behavior. **People can't learn and organizations can't progress if the feedback loop connecting behavior to desired outcomes is in any way blocked or muted.** One way or the other, this pattern helps define the Culture of the organization.

Allowing individuals to face difficult consequences can be hard. For example, as much as a parent might desire to reward a child's honesty for having the courage to admit to his or her wrong actions by glossing over the actions themselves—such misplaced mercy not only keeps the individual from learning and growing, but insults honesty itself. You don't need offer others a "free ticket" in order to protect them or make their life easier, when what you're really doing is making the situation easier for yourself while potentially harming them in the long run.

When you manage others effectively, you don't turn a blind eye to their mistakes. You provide the other person an opportunity to learn, correct and grow.

Now, this isn't spin or semantics, it's a practical approach. First, you make it safe for others by listening to what they have to say. Second, you create the ultimate safety net by being consistent in connecting behavior to consequences, thus allowing both the individual and the organization to improve. In the case of people who have not met expectations in a serious way, better to learn from the experience than to be rewarded for a behavior that will not serve them-or the organization-over the long run.