Assertiveness Techniques for Handling Difficult Behaviors

In situations where difficult behaviors continue and it becomes necessary for you to take measures to control the interaction, consider applying the following assertiveness techniques.

"Given That" Statements

• Sometimes there are factors that limit or interfere with an employee’s ability to get the job done. These problems prevent good employee performance when they become excuses for not trying to improve performance.

• “Given that” statements involve acknowledging real obstacles while insisting that the employee be responsible for helping to find a way to be more productive given the obstacles. This technique can eliminate long—and generally unproductive—discussions about how bad things really are or about whether the employee is justified in being frustrated with the situation. It is useful when an employee keeps presenting new ammunition to justify his or her complaints rather than working with you to find solutions.

• Rather than trying to argue away real limitations, you might say, “Given that we’re short of analysts today – which increases everyone’s workload, what could you do so that this problem doesn’t interfere with your getting your job done?”

Verbal Judo

• “Judo” translates to “the gentle way.” It teaches the principle of flexibility—the flexible and efficient use of balance, leverage, and momentum. Verbal judo combines active listening and “given that” statements to gently draw out an employee's resistance to a request you have made. You draw out his or her resistance and then refocus the attention on solving the problem or meeting your request.

• The first step is to invite the employee to describe his or her objections as clearly as possible. Once he or she has clearly expressed the resistance, you then use active listening or “given that” statements to circle back around to solving the problem.

• For example, you have an employee who has consistently resisted entering data using a new automated procedure, complaining that he "is too busy to do it and it is a waste of time anyway." You say, “I understand that you’re busy and that you think the new procedure may not be worthwhile. However, given that we need to use this procedure to process the data, I need for you to make sure you enter the data in accordance with it.”

Broken Record

• The broken record technique is used most appropriately for maintaining or regaining control of a situation in which the employee is unwilling to listen or is trying to sidetrack the conversation.

• In this technique, you acknowledge what the employee is saying but go right back to the point of your message as if you were a broken record. Here’s an example:
Assertiveness Techniques for Handling Difficult Behaviors (continued)

**Broken Record (continued)**

- Lee’s reports are consistently late. You’ve tried talking to her about this problem only to have her place the blame on someone else. This time, when Lee tries to lay blame by stating that the last supervisor wasn’t such a stickler about promptness, you respond by saying, “That may be the case, but right now I’m concerned about finding ways for you to get your reports in on time.”

- Lee replies that Helen doesn’t always get her reports in on time. You again use the broken record technique by saying, “Perhaps I need to talk with Helen about that, but for the moment I’m more concerned about your reports being on time.”

- Then Lee tries to change the subject by telling you that she’s having trouble with Jack in the next department. You say, “I’m interested in hearing about Jack, but first let’s settle the issue of your late reports.”

**Selective Ignoring**

- Selective ignoring is similar to the broken record technique in that it involves a refusal to respond to certain issues. This can be done by reiterating your refusal to discuss an issue in a particular way, by not responding at all when certain topics are raised, or by changing the subject.

- For example, when a person complains loudly to you in the hallway or within earshot of other employees you might use selective ignoring by saying, “I’d be more than willing to discuss the issue with you if you will come into my office and sit down.”

- If the employee continues to rant and rave, you would continue to refuse to discuss the issue until he or she comes into the office. If this does not work, you may want to combine this technique with the next, assertive withdrawal.

**Assertive withdrawal**

- Assertive withdrawal involves a clear verbal or nonverbal signal that indicates you are postponing or terminating a conversation. This is a drastic measure that should be used only when a situation is clearly out of hand and you have no option but to withdraw.

- Walking away, hanging up the phone, or nonverbally removing your attention by starting other work reinforces the verbal message that the conversation has ended. You need to accomplish this in a professional and calm manner. Before you take any action, say, “I believe we need to postpone this discussion until we are both calmer; I’ll be happy to arrange another time to discuss this with you, but for now I am ending this conversation.”