

## Steering Through Troubled Waters: Helping Colleagues Under Stress

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### Outline

- Invisible Burdens
- Basic Listening Skills
- Boundaries
- Supervising the Troubled Employee
- Special Cases

## **INVISIBLE BURDENS**

### The Invisible Back Story of Our Lives

- Empathy: The Human Connection to Patient Care

## Some Statistics

- 18% of employed individuals said they experienced symptoms of a mental health disorder in the previous month
- 1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime
- 90% of older adults have experienced one or more potentially traumatic events
- 20% of the workforce provides up to 20 hrs of eldercare weekly

## **BASIC LISTENING SKILLS**

## Creating A Listening Container

- Confidential space
- Time boundaries
- Minimize distractions

## Confidentiality and its Limits

- “If I tell you something, do you promise to keep it a secret?”
- The Correct Answer: It Depends
- You cannot keep secret:
  - Dangerous behavior or intent
  - Harassment
  - Fraud

## Basic Listening Skills

- Increasing Empathy and Trust  
lynda.com, Communication  
Fundamentals, John Ullment



## Active Listening Skills

- Minimal Encouragements
  - Non verbal cues that you are listening
  - Verbal cues that you are listening “Oh?”, “Mm hmm”, “Right.” etc.
- Paraphrasing
- Emotional Labeling
  - I get the sense that you are feeling X. Am I right about that?
- Mirroring (or Reflecting)
  - Echoing words or phrases
- Open-ended questions
- Pauses

## How to Express Support

### Do

- Ask questions to explore their experience
- Work to understand their needs and goals
- Ask: "Is there anything I can do?"

### Don't

- "That must feel ..."
- "You need to ..."

## Dangers of Advice Giving

- Most people who ask for advice from others have already resolved to act as it pleases them.  
**Khalil Gibran**
- When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand.  
**Henri Nouwen**

## Active Listening Practice

- Pair up.
- Decide who will speak first and who will listen.
- **Speaker:** Choose a scenario from the options below, tell the listener what role they are in (coworker or supervisor), and start the role play.
- **Listener:** Using active listening skills, try to keep the person talking while you say as little as possible.
- Switch!

## Active Listening Scenarios

Decide who will listen first and who will speak first.

**Speaker:** Choose a scenario from the options below, tell the listener what role they are in (coworker or supervisor), and start the role play.

**Listener:** Using active listening skills, try to keep the person talking while you say as little as possible.

### OPTION #1:

You're talking to your supervisor who called you in to ask if you were okay. You have been tired and worn out for the last several weeks. You just don't feel enthused about anything and each day is not something you look forward to. You feel like you're just going through the motions on everything you do. This has been true ever since you visited your father on vacation a few weeks ago, when you started to see signs that he may have Alzheimer's disease.

### OPTION #2

You're talking to your supervisor who just walked in after you got off the phone with yet another irate caller who really pushed all your buttons. You're feeling guilty because you snapped back at him a couple of times, but you're afraid to say anything because you don't want to get into trouble. At the same time, you want to vent!

### OPTION #3

You are talking to a coworker. You have taken your car to a repair shop because it's making funny noises. You've had it in and out of this shop several times over the last several months. It has made you late to work more than once which is embarrassing for you. You're quite upset; because you think you're being given the runaround and feel that they are very condescending toward you.



#### OPTION #4

You're talking with a co-worker about the day you had. You had a flat tire on the way to work, causing you to be late and you got yelled at by the supervisor. The dog was sick and you had to take him to the vet. Your tax bill came and you don't have money to pay it, etc.

#### OPTION #5

You just came in to work straight from a doctor's appointment where you found out the doctor wants to send you for some tests because they had some unusual readings on your annual physical. You're finding it hard to focus on your work and you've made some errors. You're speaking with a co-worker.

#### OPTION #6

You are "up to here" with your kids. They are simply driving you nuts with whining, sniveling and bickering. You love them, but boy, do you need a break. You're talking to a co-worker.

## **BOUNDARIES**

### **Case Study 1: Oversharing Manager**

- 1<sup>st</sup>, choose someone will take notes and report back to the larger group
- Read the case study.
- Put yourself in the role of advice columnist, what would you say?

## **Case Study 1:**

### **My Manager Over-shares About His Personal Life and I Want Him to Stop!**

I have been in my new job for about five weeks now with a very small service-providing firm of only about 10 employees. I am a director-level employee and report right to the COO.

Our COO is new in his role, but not new with the company. I get the feeling he does not have a lot of leadership experience, and he certainly has never led at this level before now. The issue is that he feels the need to share drama about his ex-wife, his two teenage daughters' antics, and his current wife's hatred of his ex-wife. This sharing goes on and on when it occurs — and it occurs during meetings occasionally, where it is totally inappropriate and wastes valuable time. Once in a while, we leave the office together at the end of the day, and I actually have stood outside waiting to walk to my car while he finishes another tale. He does this over-sharing with everyone, not just me.

I know I need to say something, but I do not want to appear insensitive. How do I tell this guy to back off without making it seem like I am cold and heartless? I am comfortable initiating the conversation, but unsure of the approach.

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From askamanager.com

<http://www.askamanager.org/2013/07/my-manager-over-shares-about-his-personal-life-and-i-want-him-to-stop.html>

## Boundaries are Good

- If it's not in your best interests, it's probably not in theirs either.
- If it's having a negative impact on the work, it probably isn't healthy for anyone.
- Enabling behavior blocks people from finding the help they really need.

## When and How to Say "No"

- Check in with your body's reaction.
- Think of past situations where "Yes" felt right and turned out well. How does this situation compare?
- Practice in easier situations.
- "Let me think about it."
- "I may not be the best person to help with this. Have you considered asking ... ?"
- Say what you can do.

## It's ok to ask ...

- To find a different time and place to talk about personal issues.
- Not to overhear conversations (between coworkers or on the phone) that are too personal.
- Not to be “held hostage” to a conversation that’s upsetting or is distracting you from your work.

## The Overshare

- If you're feeling uncomfortable, you can't be a good listener.
- Use a gesture to ask for a time out.
- Say “Listening to this is making me uncomfortable. Can you find someone else to talk to about this?”



## Signs of Over-Involvement

- You're feeling frustrated that they're not taking your advice.
- You're feeling underappreciated or resentful.
- Your own work is suffering.
- You're helping out a lot in your personal time.
- You're lending them money.

**SUPERVISING THE STRESSED  
EMPLOYEE**

## Case Study 2:

### Tearful Employee with Child Care Issues

- 1<sup>st</sup>, choose someone will take notes and report back to the larger group
- Read the case study.
- Put yourself in the role of advice columnist, what would you say?

### **Case Study 3: Telling a chronically tardy employee with child care issues that she has to be on time ... without tears**

I have a new salaried staff member who is a manager-in-training for a new location we are opening up. I believe this is her first management role, and this may be her first salaried position. I was not involved in her hiring process. She has worked for us for a week now, and is having child-care issues causing her to be tardy or have to leave earlier than expected. I would like your advice on the most professional way to handle this.

The nature of our business doesn't allow for flex-time, and we are a semi-warehouse environment, so we don't allow children inside the location. Location managers are also expected to be the last one out the door at night, which means sometimes you are going to be working 10-20 minutes later than you expected. She knew all of this before when she accepted the position.

The last four days, she has either been late (because the sitter was late), or she's had to leave before other non-managerial employees in the evening to pick her child up. She's a single mom, so I understand that she's in a tough spot. The first time I had a conversation with her about her tardiness, she burst into tears. My boss spoke with her the next day, just to reinforce what I had said, and she burst into tears.

What's the best way to have a crying-free conversation with her about tardiness and that as a manager, her schedule is somewhat penciled-in, and that she needs to understand that some evenings she'll be expected to work a little later?

I don't want to scare her off or to think she's not capable of doing this job, but I also can't risk a phone call from the client complaining that she hasn't been there when they expected her to be, or from non-managerial employees saying she wasn't there to unlock the door, causing them to get in trouble for punching in late.

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From askamanager.com

<http://www.askamanager.org/2013/07/telling-a-chronically-tardy-employee-with-child-care-issues-that-she-has-to-be-on-time.html>



## The Tearful Employee

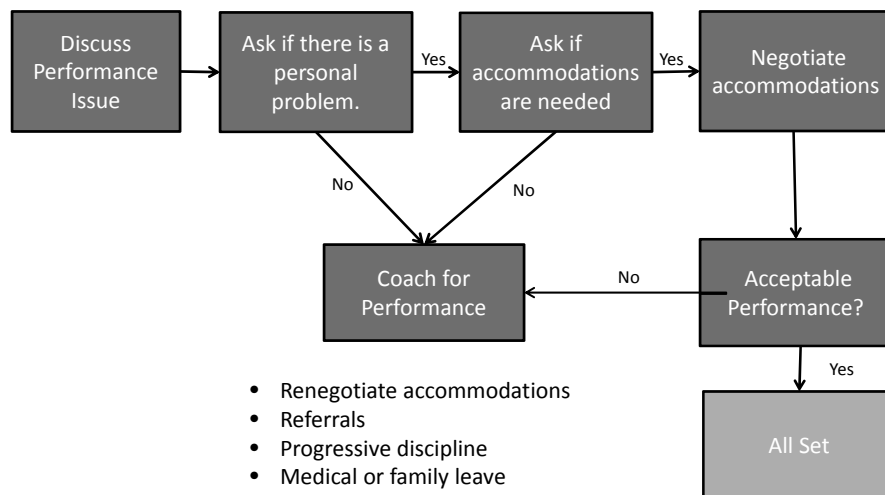
- Offer tissue
- Breathe
- When crying stops, continue the conversation  
OR
- Give the person a break, set a day and time to complete the conversation.

## Recognizing Signs of Stress

- Change in an employee's normal behavior:
  - Increased irritability
  - Increased social withdrawal
  - Uncharacteristic behaviors.
  - Change in their appearance.
  - Unexplained drop in performance or productivity
- Sudden Lack of concentration/commitment
  - Lateness
  - Absenteeism

## PERSONAL ISSUES AND WORKPLACE PERFORMANCE

### Performance Coaching and Personal Issues



## Giving Constructive Feedback



## Personal Health Issues and Employment Law

- Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA)
- What to ask, what not to ask
- Accommodations Under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)
  - Light Duty
- Short Term Disability (STD)

### Case Study 3: Rude coworker

- 1<sup>st</sup>, choose someone will take notes and report back to the larger group
- Read the case study.
- Put yourself in the role of advice columnist, what would you say?

### **Case Study 3: My New Coworker is Rude and Hostile to Clients**

I have a new coworker who sits behind me and who I have only known for a month. She is super nice to me, but lately I have noticed her having outbursts over the phone at patients. I work in the healthcare industry and we have access to sensitive information and sometimes we call people who don't feel comfortable talking to us. Lately, about one to two times a day, she has been getting in arguments with patients and acts rude/ somewhat hostile, and instead of just resolving the problem professionally, she seems to not understand normal customer service ethics. She has told me several times that she has "anger problems" and has shared personal problems she has. After these heated arguments, she gets so upset that she doesn't do anymore work for about 20-30 minutes and keeps the negative attitude throughout the day.

This week, I have a trainee, and since we can typically hear everything that goes on with this coworker, I'm afraid this is going to negatively affect my training, as well as bring complaints towards my department because of her. I am also very worried about my coworker's well-being. She needs this job, so I feel guilty if I could possibly get her fired, but I don't know how to handle this. I don't want to gossip about this to other people, but my manager and her boss respect me and I feel like this is something I should mention to them. Would the best way to confront this situation be to confront the coworker (I've tried casually mentioning advice on dealing with patients who don't want to confirm info a couple times), talk to the person who trained her, or go straight to my manager?

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From askamanager.com

<http://www.askamanager.org/2014/01/my-new-coworker-is-rude-to-clients-my-company-wont-give-me-my-personal-laptop-back-and-more.html>

## Negotiating Accommodations

- Options
  - Paid Leave
  - Unpaid Leave
  - Flexible Schedule
  - Work from Home
  - Place/time for personal phone calls
  - Temporarily delegating some responsibilities
- Before agreeing, know the impact on the work

## Help is at Hand

- Human Resources
- EAP, LifeScope *where there's more to life*  
<http://www.lifescopEAP.com>  
*Username: williams college*  
*Password: guest*
- Harassment and Discrimination Advisors:  
<http://diversity.williams.edu/discrimination-harassment/sexual-harassment-discrimination-advisors/>
- Campus Safety and Security x4444

## Case Study 4: Drinking on the Job

- 1<sup>st</sup>, choose someone will take notes and report back to the larger group
- Read the case study.
- Put yourself in the role of advice columnist, what would you say?

## **Case Study 4: My Employee is Drinking on the Job**

I am an administrative manager, and one of my employees, Pete, a long-term employee has been stretching his lunch hour to two hours, and appears to be drinking during it. When he comes back from lunch he smells like a brewery and sometimes slurs his words.

When it happened the first time I didn't say anything to Pete because I felt it might be an isolated incident. If it happened only once it wouldn't be worth my time and effort. By the end of the week, however, I realized Pete did it four out of the five days. So, my first step was to have a feedback discussion with Pete to let him know his performance was unsatisfactory. I called him in Friday afternoon and told him I noticed he had been taking two hours for lunch and apparently had been drinking on his lunch hour; I explained this was unsatisfactory, and I asked him to please discontinue it.

Pete's response was to tell me he had a lot of things on his mind. He related he was in the process of getting a divorce because he found his wife playing around; his daughter was coming home from college because she was pregnant; his son had just been arrested for selling pot in school; his bookie was after him because he was behind in his gambling payments; and his car needed a new transmission. My five-minute feedback discussion turned into an hour-and-a-half crying session.

What do I do?

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Adapted from Coaching for Improved Work Performance by Ferdinand F. Fournies.



## **SPECIAL CASES**

### The Grieving Employee

- “I’m sorry for your loss.”
- “If there’s anything I can do, ask.”