

Encourage Positive Engagement – A Management Case Study

Mary walked into the staff meeting and caught the end of a conversation taking place between two of her team; actually one particular team member was holding court. Peter was telling all those present what he thought of a newly appointed manager in another department.

Immediately Mary was faced with a dilemma. How was she to react to this situation? To do nothing would imply she agreed with Peter, or at least empathised with his version of the story. To challenge Peter directly would place her on a collision course with Peter, in front of all her team. To make matters worse, Mary had not worked with the new manager and therefore was in no position to understand what Peter's experiences had been or how he had formed his perceptions of the new manager. Were Mary to confront Peter at this point there was a high risk Peter would react in an emotional manner and decide to try and score points with others in the team, at the expense of Mary.

Mary understood it was important for her to create space, to avoid an equally negative reaction. Mary needed to move the discussion out of the meeting, to a place where others in the team were not involved.

Walking up to her team members, Mary stopped in front of Peter and said "Peter, clearly I didn't hear the entire conversation and therefore I am not in a position to judge you or your experiences. I don't believe it is appropriate for you to criticise another manager, or for that matter another person, in a forum where that person cannot respond. I would appreciate you not doing this in the future." Mary stepped back from Peter and turned to address the remainder of the group.

Notice how Mary has acted. Firstly she has avoided a negative reaction. Secondly she has avoided passing judgement on either Peter or his comments. Thirdly, Mary has avoided inviting Peter to debate with her and finally she has established her expectations of ongoing behaviour. This is a good start. Regrettably, on this occasion, it wasn't sufficient.

At the next meeting Peter was feeling confident that he had got away with his comments at the last meeting. Peter had interpreted Mary's relaxed manner as a sign Mary lacked leadership. Part way through this meeting Peter once again launched into a tirade against the new manager. Mary was more prepared this time. Mary had used the time between meetings to think through her relationship with Peter. Anticipating Peter may not respond positively to her earlier expectations Mary had decided on further action, if needed.

Mary looked over at Peter and said, "Peter, I'm sorry you have decided to persist with this behaviour after I had asked you not to at our last meeting. As I stated at our last meeting I don't believe it is appropriate to make comments about someone that is unable to defend themselves. I have decided the next time I hear you make comments about this person again I will invite him to meet with you and I. In this way you will be able to express your concerns directly to the person concerned."

Let's examine Mary's actions one more time. Firstly Mary elected not to display any negative reaction. Mary understood her role was to be a role model; to demonstrate the behaviour she expected of everyone in her team. Mary could have tried to impose some form of punitive punishment upon Peter, such as suspending him from future meetings or asking him to leave the room. Doing so would not have addressed the core issue. Had Mary taken this option she would have been treating Peter as a child. Peter might have tried to turn this to his advantage and try to achieve a level of martyrdom amongst others in the work group.

In doing what she did Mary has established with Peter the consequences of continuing with this behaviour. In a very non-confrontational manner Mary is asking Peter to challenge his own assumptions. Peter has clearly observed the new manager's behaviour and, in turn, has formed his own perceptions of that behaviour. When we are forced to examine the assumptions that underpin our perceptions we often develop a new level of understanding. Peter now had a choice, stop making ill-judged comments or be placed in a position where his assumptions would be challenged.

Unfortunately Peter suffers from poor judgment. He decides not to heed Mary and continues with his behaviour. Mary feels she is left with no choice. She has set out her expectations and she has informed Peter of the consequences of his ongoing behaviour. Mary arranges to meet with the new manager. She explains the background to the problem with the other manager and then invites him to meet with Peter and herself, explaining that for Peter to move towards productive input it is important he understands how he formed his perceptions. The new manager agrees to participate. Mary then informs Peter and invites him to attend the meeting also.

At the meeting between Mary, Peter and the new manager, Mary understands her role is that of facilitator. As a facilitator it is not Mary's role to take sides or adopt a position. It is her role to enable both parties to discuss and explore their individual perspectives.

Mary commences the meeting by thanking both Peter and the new manager for agreeing to participate in the meeting. Mary then invites Peter to explain what he had observed that led him to form his judgments about the new manager. This is a moment of truth for Peter. It is the point where trust is established. Mary has been seen to do the thing she said she would do. This is important to establish credibility. In attending the meeting Peter has accepted the possibility he may have formed an incorrect perception. This takes courage.

There is no negative outcome to this process, only positives. At any stage Peter could have elected to discontinue his behaviour without losing face. Regardless of what transpires at the meeting between Mary, Peter and the new manager, Peter will have developed a higher understanding and awareness. He will have been allowed to go on a journey, at his own pace, with dignity and without fear.

This management tip has been brought to you compliments of John Coxon & Associates. We work with management teams and managers in the health sector and not for profit sector in Australia and New Zealand to help develop leadership capacity and management competencies. We achieve this through consulting, management coaching and professional development opportunities. Telephone Australia (03)5561 2228 or NZ (0272) 583232. Email john@johncoxon.com.au or go to our website at www.johncoxon.com.au or www.johncoxon.co.nz. Please feel free to pass this information onto anyone you feel may benefit. Should you feel the need for further help with workplace stress or any other management issue please do not hesitate to contact us to discuss the options available.