

training

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Reaching Consensus: Getting Buy-In...by Simply Asking

by Ariel Lublin

As an HR manager at a prominent investment bank, I am responsible for ensuring that line managers complete written evaluations of their employees. One line manager – Pat – refuses to complete the required forms, which reflects poorly on me. How do I get Pat to fulfill his obligation?

While our instincts often tell us to push harder, quote corporate policy, and threaten to escalate, strong-arming in this way can increase tension, and often won't get you closer to meeting your objective.

Even though you may resent Pat's behavior, the best way to reach your goals may be to temporarily suspend your focus on having him complete the forms. To resolve the problem, you first need to *understand* the problem. More specifically, why is a good manager refusing to fill out some simple forms?

As a means of putting your frustrations on hold, remind yourself that you are not giving up on Pat's compliance; rather, you are simply choosing a different approach in which knowledge is the key. After all, it's unlikely that Pat's version of the situation is, "I am lazy and obstinate, and like to create problems for HR." So, what *is* Pat's story?

Start by considering how Pat might be viewing the situation. Venture a best guess of what his concerns might be: What needs is he trying to meet? What are his goals and priorities? What does he really care about? If you don't know, there's a great opportunity for your next conversation to be very different from those previous, as you have something to learn. (In fact, it's very important to confirm your assumptions even if you are confident that you do know his concerns – you'll communicate your desire to collaborate, and you might find that your assumptions were wrong.)

Then, begin your conversation by *soliciting Pat's perspective*. Be sure you listen to and take seriously what he says, even (especially) if you don't agree. Odds are that Pat will enjoy sharing his thoughts and that he will appreciate your new approach. Ideas for opening the conversation include, "What is standing in the way from you completing the forms?", or "What kind of support do you need from HR?", or simply "I'd like to get your perspective on these forms." By eliciting Pat's point of view, you may learn useful information to bring back to HR. And, feeling that his views have been considered, Pat will be more open to listening to you.

Now *explain your own needs and objectives*, communicating why the forms are important to you. Acknowledge that your concerns don't trump his, and vice versa (otherwise Pat likely will go back to resisting).

If you listened carefully to what Pat said, you might also find ways to show him that his doing what you want (completing the forms) can actually benefit him. For example, the forms may provide important information to HR about how his employees are performing. This might help HR identify that his team deserves more training, or that he needs additional staff, or that his budget should be increased.

Understanding Pat's resistance may be key to both *unlocking important information* and *gaining his cooperation*. This can lead to working together more effectively - now and in the future.

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