

training

October 2008

Reaching Consensus: Discussing the Workload

by Donny Ebenstein

As an HR generalist on a two-person team, I share responsibility for all of the HR tasks of our group. In theory, the work should be divided 50/50 percent. But lately it seems like I'm getting stuck with the toughest assignments, while my colleague takes the easy ones. I'm not sure if this is just coincidence, but it's really bothering me. How do I raise the issue without sounding defensive?

You've already taken the first step in resolving this issue—recognizing it's something that should be discussed. While it can be tempting simply to ignore the issue and avoid a tough conversation, that rarely solves the problem. In fact, left to themselves, issues like this often fester and get worse, making them even harder to discuss constructively.

The next step in addressing the situation will actually take place before your conversation with your colleague. It involves preparing yourself to hear your colleague's point of view. Take time to consider how she might be viewing the situation—try to be open to the idea that there might be more than one way of looking at things. If you can, try to attribute favorable motivations to your colleague. For example, perhaps she is unaware of how hard you have been working lately. Or, maybe she is working on difficult assignments you don't know about. Although considering alternative perspectives takes work, it becomes easier and easier with practice.

As you enter the conversation, remind yourself to actively listen for new information—to discover things you might not have been aware of and that you hadn't considered. And, again, remind yourself to remain open to a perspective that is different from your own.

As the conversation unfolds, be sure to frame your thoughts as one of several possible perspectives, rather than "the absolute truth." After all, you might not have all of the information you need to form an unbiased opinion. Moreover, you want your colleague to really hear you and your side of the story. For that to happen, you must demonstrate your willingness to listen to her side of the story.

Begin the conversation with a phrase such as, "I'd like to share my point of view on....," which implies an understanding that your colleague's point of view may be very different from your own. After sharing your perspective, it's your colleague's turn to share her narrative. Manage that transition with something like, "That's my perspective. How do you see things?" Proactively soliciting your colleague's input reinforces the notion that you are open to discussion and dialogue.

From this point forward, make sure you spend a significant portion of the conversation listening to what your colleague has to say—she should talk as much as you do. Now, this might be easier

said than done since she is likely to present ideas with which you vehemently disagree.

Nevertheless, a productive conversation can only happen when both parties listen to each other. You certainly want your colleague to take in your perspective. The corollary is you not only must extend the same courtesy, but it's very likely you'll have to lead by example. To that end, instead of interrupting when she says something you feel is incorrect or unfair, hold off until she finishes her thought, and then summarize what she has said. "Let me make sure I understand what you are saying..." is a phrase I find effective. Pausing and summarizing will slow down the conversation, and will better ensure you are actively listening, rather than just remaining silent without really digesting her words.

Remember, considering your colleague's perspective does not mean you will necessarily agree with it or concede in the end. Yet, by keeping an open mind, acknowledging that your perspective isn't the only way of interpreting the situation, and creating an environment for your colleague to share her thoughts, you can have constructive conversations about even the most sensitive and emotional topics.

Donny Ebenstein is a partner with Consensus. Consensus (www.consensusgroup.com) is a negotiation and conflict resolution firm that offers consulting, training and development, and international peace building services to private and public sector clients throughout the world. If you have questions you would like answered, please contact Consensus at (212) 391-8100 or inquiry@consensusgroup.com.