

Article for CIPD Sussex Branch Newsletter

When employees suffer setbacks – tips for helping them Back on Track.

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Many people experience big setbacks at some time in their working lives. Some people carry the shadow months, even years later, fulfilling less than their full potential. What can you offer when, as an HR professional, you are called on to support an employee who has lost confidence?

The circumstances leading to difficult work experiences are complex, and you may well already have entered into any one of your formal processes. Procedures are intended to create the conditions for fair and consistent handling of a range of issues. What they often cannot do is repair the emotional damage such events may produce, and the resultant drop in performance.

What happens when things go wrong

Triggers for loss of confidence may include poor communication, bullying, toxic working relationships, severe stress, illness or even circumstances which challenge an individual's integrity (such as a cheating colleague). These events create negative emotions, which can affect relationships with boss, colleagues and loved ones.

The resulting stress reactions, if not resolved, may eventually compromise the individual's health and general wellbeing, leading from high anxiety, eventually to exhaustion and burnout. At this point, people are vulnerable to stress-related illness, or to the exacerbation of existing medical conditions such as cardio-vascular or digestive disease, or late-onset diabetes.¹

Tips for getting Back on Track

When employees hit confidence barriers created by work issues, here is an approach to supporting them back to effectiveness. It is based on a coaching programme developed by Ann Lewis Coaching. The process has five main stages:

1. acknowledging the reality of the experience and its effect on them.
2. creating a vision of how they would like to be operating when they are Back on Track.
3. raising their awareness of who they are, in terms of their strengths, values, passion and contribution.
4. learning from their own response to the way the original situation developed.
5. creating and implementing a plan for going forward.

The rest of this article addresses the individual directly.

¹ Nowack, K. M. (1989). Coping style, cognitive hardiness, & health status. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 12, 145-158..

Acknowledgment and awareness-raising

It may seem obvious to say that to get Back on Track, the first step is to want to do so. This involves recognising that you are in a situation which has temporarily knocked you off balance, and identifying exactly what is and is not going wrong.

A little first aid to take the edge off anxiety can help at this point. Try sitting in a favourite chair, eyes closed, taking a few deep breaths (always a good start), and then imagining in great detail the face of someone who makes you smile. Hold that vision for as long as you can before slowly opening your eyes.

When you're feeling relatively calm, start by getting a firm grip on exactly what is happening. Write it all down in detail, or talk to someone you trust. Don't censor, and don't edit. When you fully understand, destroy anything you have written, both as a symbolic gesture, and to prevent your repeatedly going over it.

Creating a vision

Again, in as relaxed a state as you can achieve, describe, in detail what you would like to be different about this situation. How would you recognise a satisfying and fulfilling outcome? What will you bring to it? Think big.

Be creative – make a collage, write a story, or a poem if the urge takes you. Keep this – you'll use it to stay on the path back to full effectiveness.

Revisiting your skills, values and strengths

When you're fully yourself, who are you? What are your strengths? What is important to you, and how do you bring that to your work? How would your team describe your strengths? What personal resources do you bring to this situation which you may not have had earlier in your life? These are your building blocks.

Taking on the learning

Now you have a vision for going forward, and a renewed sense of who you are, it's important to revisit your situation to find the learning.

Often when bad experiences occur, people don't have the opportunity to take stock in a neutral way. Friends and family can be enormously supportive, but often they construct a coping myth ('you are 100% right, "they" are entirely wrong'), which may make vital learning difficult to achieve.

You need to take space to consider what, if anything, you might have handled differently. How can this experience make you stronger? What will you do in future to limit the emotional effect of such experiences? Absorbing this learning is important in helping to avoid a repeat experience.

Planning to move on

Armed with raised awareness and reflection about yourself, you can devise a plan for going forward, based on your strengths, expertise and values, and from a position of greater confidence. What will you do? Who can help? How do you feel?

Points to watch

This is a sensitive process for many people, and if they work with someone, it must be in a framework of trust and confidentiality. Working with a coach is ideal.

In most situations, this five-stage process will be effective in enabling individuals to develop a more realistic and optimistic outlook. If they continue to show signs of

more deep seated anxiety, or appear depressed, they should be encouraged to talk to their GP or to seek the help of a counsellor.

You are welcome to use this as the basis for a tips leaflet, provided its source is acknowledged.

Resources

Goleman, Daniel, with the Dalai Lama, "Destructive Emotions" (Bloomsbury).

Rushton, AnnA, "How to Cope Successfully with Stress" (Wellhouse Publishing Ltd).

For assessing stress levels, StressScan™ from Consulting Tools:

http://www.consultingtools.com/main.asp?prd_XMLID=stressassessmentprofile

British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy, for a list of practitioners by location (<http://www.bacp.co.uk/>).

www.annlewiscoaching.com for newsletters about the Back on Track process.

Biographical information

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