

Excuse Me

Many organisations are placing a much greater emphasis on diversity, inclusion, wellbeing and belonging than they were three years ago. This increased focus started pre-pandemic but Covid and remote working really accelerated it. At a practical level, policies, communication, decision making and everyday language have changed, and in some cases, at a rapid pace.

Reflections from a number of our own clients suggest that the increased focus on the individual has delivered numerous benefits. In some cases, they are simply better places to work. However, we are also beginning to hear about the unintended consequences of these changes. You may recognise the sentiment of the following statement (one that I have heard at least six times in recent months):

"My company has made a big thing about valuing people and respecting personal circumstances but despite telling my manager about my difficult situation, she won't reduce my targets and has marked me as not meeting expectations!"

Now, there are lots of variables to be considered for reduced performance, but I think it can be simplified to three important dimensions:

1.Explanation vs excuse

2.Timed well vs timed badly

3.Effective discussion vs ineffective discussion

1 Explanation vs Excuse

Different organisational policies and country norms, laws and points in time will be relevant to what constitutes an 'explanation' rather than an 'excuse'. For example, employee stress caused by an increase in manager expectations being a legitimate explanation for a reduction in performance in one scenario:

"Although you have achieved less than we set out, given the circumstances, I don't think the target was reasonable. The rigour of your work has been excellent"

However, in the same organisation, but different site, it was seen as an unacceptable reason (excuse) for reduced performance.

"You were in a position to decide what you got done and the level of rigour you put in. You repeatedly chose things you could have delegated and in some cases I think you should have pushed back and not done them. However, what you have done repeatedly is shown an inability to flex from excessive levels of perfectionism that were unnecessary and massively time consuming"

There has to be shared understanding of what is an explanation vs an excuse, and it requires some judgement, ideally based on principles.

2 Timed Well vs Timed Badly

When there is an issue (explanation) for why performance may be affected, timing is very important. The same issue flagged early on with a discussion and plan around it is very different from raising the issue on the back of a poor performance review. The cause of the issue may be sensitive, difficult to talk about and the individual may find it difficult.

An example I came across was an individual (Bob) agreeing to work that he didn't think he could do in the way requested as a result of his neurodiversity. Bob didn't mention that there was an issue to his manager until things went badly wrong. Bob's manager was annoyed with Bob for not raising the issue before making a commitment and Bob was furious with his manager for not respecting his neurodiversity. The timing was wrong and the consequence was unhealthy tension for months afterwards.

3

Effective Discussion vs Ineffective Discussion

Some discussions that relate to diversity and inclusion are difficult and I have worked with many individuals in coaching sessions on planning and practising options.

I strongly believe that some people need more support for these conversations and how to balance respect for the individual with performance required for the role. In some cases when organisations quickly launch very positive inclusion initiatives, one of the unintended consequences is leaders and managers not knowing how to handle those conversations.

As my colleague Mike points out, leaders and managers need to develop capability in articulating the boundaries between the individual employee and the organisation, through stories and principles rather than rules or absolutes. It is a mistake to assume leaders and managers have innate abilities to have those conversations in an effective and consistent way. At OE Cam we provide advice, support and challenge to leaders and managers in having effective difficult conversations. This can take the form of executive team development in order to agree the principles in line with the desired culture and values, collective leadership and management development to develop the mindset and skills or individual or buddy coaching for more specific preparation for live issues.



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