MANAGING A PERSONAL CRISIS

It’s bad enough having to cope with under performance and telling people when their work isn’t up to standard, but what do you do when someone comes to you with bad news? There are so many possibilities these days: divorce, illness, problems with the children or parents, tragic holidays – the list is endless.

I worked recently with a manager who had to handle just such a sensitive situation. A team member came to tell her that he’d been diagnosed with a serious illness and was waiting to hear what the treatment would be. He was dreadfully upset both because of the situation, but also he recognising there would be a major impact on the team.

As a manager this is a real test of your emotional intelligence and how you handle it will impact on your credibility within the team. Whilst the situation will inevitably be very sad, it is also a real opportunity to demonstrate the team climate you are looking for. People make important judgements based on how managers respond when the chips are down – even if they are not personally involved, they will be watching to see what you do. After all, it might be them next time.

**Person first, work second**

Make the person and their situation the priority. However busy you are at the time, there is nothing more important than this, so clear your diary, sit down with them and just listen.

Chances are you will feel upset yourself, especially if this is someone you’ve worked with for a long time. Bear in mind what you know of the person already - if they are naturally stoic and don’t like displays of emotion, deal with it as rationally as you can. However, if they show you how upset they are, let them know how much you care.

It’s not always easy to deal with difficulties in the office, especially if you work open plan. Find a quiet office, take them off site for a coffee or go and see them at home. If you are in any doubt about how to handle it, think about what you would need if it were your problem and let that guide you.

Part of your job is to take the pressure off from a work perspective. They will be worried about the tasks sitting on their desks and if it’s likely to be a long haul illness or crisis, they will be afraid for their job. Make absolutely clear that you and the team will manage the day job on their behalf and reassure them about their job. Whatever the issue, recovery will be easier and quicker if extraneous pressure is reduced.
There may be some practical things you can do, like putting them in touch with the company Employee Assistance Programme. It’s also worth letting your HR department know if you think it might have long term implications.

**Management impact**

But remember this isn’t just about the person involved, it is also about the role model you present as a manager. If your aim is to create a team where people work well together and deliver great results, these human happenings will do much to set the tone. I have spoken to many people who feel totally committed to their manager and company because of how they helped in a crisis. Ranging from a major problem to the childminder being ill, the care and concern shown was a direct demonstration of respect – and people don’t forget that.

And once you have finished, take a moment for yourself. This is not easy work, but a really important part of your job.