

# Staying centred

**H**ow do some HR professionals deal with difficult performance matters with such aplomb? It is generally appreciated that HR is a mix of technical knowledge and soft skills, but how do some HR professionals manage to work through difficult matters when others unhinge?

Often key HR capabilities aren't covered in orthodox HR university courses. The key difference for HR professionals being successful in achieving real outcomes for their businesses may come from being "wired" to deal with very challenging people situations.

So where do early HR practitioners learn advanced people negotiation capabilities? Mentoring, graduate programs, or maybe even osmosis? The reality is that with HR teams becoming smaller and structured around central areas supporting a small number of business partners, key HR capabilities such as dealing with difficult negotiations are learnt the hard way or, sometimes not at all.

At a recent seminar on performance management presented by The Next Gen, (The Next Step's early HR career market business), Mary Lyras from Freehills provided some clues for the less experienced professionals in the audience on how to manage the high emotions that are sometimes developed in difficult performance negotiations.

In her presentation, Mary focused on some techniques that have served her well and have origins in her core organisational psychology studies. One of the elements of Mary's strategy for dealing with performance management negotiations and achieving positive outcomes was her advice to the gathering to "stay centred".

## So what is staying centred?

There are perceptions about what staying centred is all about. Clearly it's a frame of mind. This frame of mind allows (amongst other things) experienced HR professionals to handle the weighing up of evidence during difficult performance discussions in a fair and professional manner. (Like a lot of things in HR, it sounds easy but is not for a lot of people.)

A powerful positioning of this mindset is the reflective question, "whatever we do here will be evaluated by people both internal and external to the organisation in the short, medium and longer terms". The capability to manage the big picture with the here and now combined with basic fairness principles and commercial reality is a tricky balancing exercise that HR professionals need to achieve for a successful negotiation result.

## What are tips to staying centred?

Some of the techniques that Mary discussed at The Next Gen seminar for staying centred can be employed for a wide range of situations, not just working with people through performance discussions. Some of these techniques include the following:

- **Have a framework** – the basic building block of working through a performance negotiation is a logical framework. One approach that can be employed has just three elements – Describe (the situation back), Diagnose (the real issues), and Decide (the solution/approach). The importance of a framework can't be overstated. When you are in the middle of a process, having some context to the approach you are taking is crucial.
- **Have a clear set of principles** – balancing the needs of the organisation and the individuals involved with an overriding principle of fairness was important in Mary's view to resolve matters appropriately.
- **Have a clear context** – what is the message the business wants to relay? For instance, is the company trying to build a high performance culture? If so, how will this process reinforce this strategy is a key question.
- **Have a clear set of questions** – a range of open-ended questions is important to allow for appropriate responses and reflection by the parties to be achieved.
- **Time is a friend** – if possible allow some time to pass to allow emotions to dissipate.

The developed ability to staying centred may just be one of the most important capabilities for any HR professional to develop and master for HR career success. No matter what level of HR practitioner, when the business is wavering in its principles, a consistent approach from HR will be highly respected and "staying centred" is the key to achieving this position.

Whilst it could be said that dealing with difficult people negotiations is a core day to day requirement of many HR roles, this capability receives less focus in many HR recruitment decisions than some very basic needs, such as industry experience. Having industry jargon "down pat" is quite often more valued in recruitment decisions than an HR professional's track record in constructing positive people outcomes by staying centred – that just doesn't make sense!

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