TOOL TIP

Episode 4: When They Push Back – How to De-escalate Team Defensiveness Without Backing Down

First-time managers often face intense resistance, eyerolls, or behind-the-scenes escalation when giving feedback to defensive employees. Here is a model that can help you to not react in a way you may regret.

Consider The Identity-Safe Reset (ISR Protocol)

First: De-escalate the physiology.

Receiving pushback can come with physiological reactions that are *visceral* (heart, gut) and/or *somatic* (skin, pores). Both you and your team member may be experiencing these.

- The moment you notice eye-rolls or defensiveness, pause and take one quiet breath to regulate your own nervous system.
- You can also swallow, count to three, or use some other way to pause.

Second: Acknowledge the effort.

Let them know you see them and appreciate their work.

- To stabilize their professional identity trigger, state what is working about their current output.
- Be honest and lead with your authenticity. They will know if you're saying something nice just for the sake of it.

Third: State the high-standard standard.

This may sound humorous and alliterative, but your typical, average work should aim for excellence.

- Communicate words to the effect that your feedback is grounded in the high standard for excellence on the team, and that your absolute belief is that they have the skills to achieve it.

Fourth: Co-design the solution.

Teamwork makes the dream work, baby!

- Transition immediately into an operational brainstorm rather than a debate about past mistakes.
- Remind your team-member that they have agency and autonomy to execute your co-designed solution.

Your journey as a new leader may be really challenging, but you got this!

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