

Leadership Barometer 185 Pushing Back

Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



As a leader, you will run into times when people are pushing back on your ideas. There can be many different reasons why an employee could disagree. It is critical to find out what is going on before you respond. If you guess wrong, then serious damage to trust can occur.

This article is about the process of pushing back. We will discuss several of the reasons why you may see this behavior. I will suggest several antidotes that you may find helpful.

Keep in mind that there is an infinite combination of things that can cause some pushback. As a leader, it is always up to you to do the right thing in the right way. The best advice is to always follow your values and show empathy for what the employee is experiencing.

Honest disagreement can lead to pushing back

Hopefully, this root cause is what you will run into the most. In this case, the employee has a different opinion of what is right to do or say. It is important to let the employee express himself and not put him down. Listen carefully to the input and consider it as valid information before deciding what to do.

This behavior is what I call ["Reinforcing Candor."](#) which is the best way to grow a culture of trust. This is true especially when there are disagreements between people.

In a group setting, it is often helpful to ask what other people think about the topic. You get a more balanced view of the sentiment of the entire group rather than just one voice.

By treating the employee as an adult and encouraging honest dialog, you are creating psychological safety for the employee. This practice will normally enhance trust as long as the employee is sincere with his input.

Searching for a compromise

The employee may feel that your proposal is okay but that there are better possibilities. Go into some form of brainstorming where the group can consider the merits of several ideas. Be open to these ideas and judge them fairly. By seriously considering alternate views, you demonstrate flexibility and openness.

Pushing back by acting out

Part of leading well is being able to read the emotions of other individuals and the group. Be sure to observe the body language in the room.

If the employee has some kind of issue with you or others in the group, he may push back. It is a way to express his frustration. He wants to grab air time so he can vent about what is really on his mind.

In a meeting, it may help to shift the topic. Ask for a follow-up discussion with the person. You need to be extremely gentle with the shift in order to not enflame the person further. Once you are in a more private setting you can ask the employee what is really bugging him.

Keep in mind that no one solution is going to be right for all individuals and situations. You have to consider the person and the context, then select your approach.

Grandstanding

The employee may be trying to grab the stage to gain attention. This usually happens for the purpose of lobbying for some other course of action. By monopolizing the stage, he is blocking other people from getting the floor. He takes the majority of air time. You need to provide for other people to get air time as well.

Hindering progress

Sometimes an employee will keep talking just to slow down progress. He does not agree with the direction you are heading. He tries to limit the ability to make decisions.

Remind the vocal employee that everyone on the team deserves the right to be heard.

Advancing his own cause

Sometimes the employee is adamant that his way is the only logical way to view the issue. Poll the entire group to see if his view is supported by all. Not taking his advice because the majority of people felt it was wrong is explainable.

Summary

There are some people who will push back on most ideas just for sport. You need to coach these individuals to be more respectful of the group.

It is a delicate balance because he needs to feel he can speak up without getting smashed. That is where the technique of **reinforcing candor** is the best medicine. The first order of business is to make the person glad that he brought up his concerns. By insisting on respectful dialog, you foster better teamwork and take advantage of the creativity of the entire team.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations.