**Have We Become Too Nice at Work?**

***By Karen Warren***

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**Ongoing underperformance can be linked to our unwillingness to have difficult conversations, says Karen Warren**

In recent years, I’ve noticed an increasing trend that bothers me – an aversion to challenge and the idea that we can only offer support, rather than criticism, when someone is not performing. We don’t want to upset people, I’m often told. But what if this approach isn’t actually in anyone’s best interests?

Nobody is in the market for being mean. But we’ve become so conflict-averse in the workplace that we are afraid of challenging underperformance or inappropriate behaviour in case we cause unrest or, worse, encourage someone to claim they are being bullied. We can’t hold people to account if they don’t have clear objectives for what we want them to achieve – but equally, if people do not believe there will be consequences for not performing as expected, we remove the ability to have honest conversations about performance.

It will always be easier to avoid a difficult conversation or make excuses for someone than to find the energy to constructively, kindly and assertively challenge poor performance or behaviour. Underperforming staff can be hugely defensive and argue back very aggressively, which can be intimidating. It’s easy to see why we go to great lengths to steer clear of these situations.

But over time, repeated poor behaviour or underperformance can become normal if it isn’t challenged. And when a new line manager tries to hold a member of staff to account, with kindness and compassion, they can receive an avalanche of negativity in response. Nobody, they will claim, has had a problem with them before, so it must be their new boss’s expectations that are to blame. From the manager’s perspective, they will feel they are taking all the flack for a situation that should have been addressed years ago.

In the public sector in particular, there is easy access to coaching and mentoring support, which can make a real difference. But we can’t always coach or mentor someone out of underperformance, a negative attitude or poor attendance, which means we need to be more assertive with challenging issues.

Unfortunately, we do not train people to have these difficult conversations, at any level of the organisation. If underperformance is not challenged among the senior ranks, junior employees will feel they have carte blanche to follow suit. And if we deal with the issue of underperformers by moving them out of the department or organisation, we are just storing up trouble further down the line: the same individuals may well bounce back to you having been promoted and emboldened elsewhere.

It’s time to have more assertive conversations with staff about their performance, and empower others to do the same. If you have individuals in your organisation who don’t know if they are performing or not, I’d venture it is because it’s easier to tell someone they are fabulous than to tell them the truth. But management isn’t just about having pleasant conversations – it’s time to tackle the difficult ones too.

**Karen Warren is a personal development specialist and founder of KW Inner Strength**