

The DESC Script and STEP Model

Tools for managing poor performance

The DESC Script

The DESC Script is a tool for getting someone to change their behaviour.

If a team member's behaviour is preventing them from performing as they should, you must deal with this. We are often afraid to ask someone to change their behaviour because experience has taught us this leads to conflict. Feeling threatened, we do one of two things: We fight or we flee. Fighting will ensure there conflict. If the team member retaliates, the conflict is out in the open. It will dominate the meeting sand leave a bad taste in everybody's mouth. It also will not bring about change. If the team member passively agrees with you, the conflict will be under the surface and you can expect the team member to sabotage the meeting by agreeing to do things and then not doing them. They will also probably sabotage anything else they can because their prime motivation will be revenge. If you are too afraid to deal with the team member's undesirable behaviour, it will continue and they will have no respect for the system of individual KPIs or for you!

The good news is, there is a way you can ask someone to change their behaviour that does not require you to be aggressive or submissive. It allows you to be assertive. Here's the difference. When you behave aggressively towards a person, you are effectively saying: "My needs are all that matters. Yours don't count. I'm going to get my needs met." When you behave in a passive or submissive way, you are effectively saying: "My needs are not important but your are. We'll do it your way." You can probably see these are two-sides of the same coin. When you are aggressive you try to win and when you are submissive you give up and let the other person win. But both of these are win-lose.

Being assertive is quite different. The assertive person is effectively saying: "My needs are important but so are yours. Let's see if we can find a way both of us get most of our needs met." The game is now win-win and since neither party doesn't fear losing, there is no threat and no conflict.

The really good news is there a method for assertively asking someone to change their behaviour. It is called the DESC Script.

The DESC Script

The DESC Script contains six parts to it. Each is critical to a successful outcome so don't take short cuts! Also, language is very important so I strongly recommend you memorise the script and stick to it. Even a slight deviation could put you into a win-lose situation.

Step One – Focus on a specific behaviour

The key to assertively asking someone to change their behaviour is to focus on a specific behaviour, not generalisations or the person themselves. Be

selective. Don't try to change several behaviours at once. Choose just one example of the behaviour. If you want to get a team member to come to work on time, choose just one example of them being late. You don't need to list every time.

Example:

Don't say: You don't care about your job.

Don't say: You go to bed too late.

Don't say: You're always late for work.

Say: When you get to work at 8:45 as you did this morning.....

This last statement is a fact. It cannot be argued with. Just as importantly, you have not attacked them personally. You have focused the conversation on the person's behaviour, which is your purpose in meeting with them.

Step Two: State the problem

If you are not careful, once you have identified the behaviour you will be tempted to launch into a tirade about how terrible they are as a person or how serious their misdemeanour is, or what will happen to them if they don't change – much like your parents used to do! Our aim is to have a calm discussion that results in a change in behaviour. The best way to do that is to talk about yourself, not about the team member. Their behaviour will be causing a problem for you or you wouldn't be worried about it so why not tell them what that problem is.

Example:

When you come to work at 0845 as you did this morning.

It causes a problem for me because that's when we meet to plan the day

This statement is another statement of fact about which the team member cannot really argue. They might not think it should cause a problem for you, but that doesn't change the fact it does. Being late for work may not cause a problem for them but they will quickly see that is not the point. The point is it causes a problem for you that you don't want.

Remember, all you need to do is state the problem. You don't need to explain it or justify why it is a problem.

Step Three: Outline the change

We really don't want to dwell on what the person is doing wrong. We want them to change their behaviour so your problem goes away. The easiest way to do that is to tell them what you would like to see happen. Again, less is more. Just state the change you would like to see happen. And be specific.

Example

When you come to work at 0845 as you did this morning it causes a problem for me because that's when we meet to plan the day.

Starting tomorrow, I would like you to be here at 8:30 AM when we have our team meeting.

Step Four: Explain the benefit to you.

You do not want to justify or defend your request the team member behaves in this new way. If you do logically explain your reasoning, you open yourself to a debate. Just as we did in Step 2, simply explain the benefit to you. Because you are talking about how you believe your life would improve, there can be no argument.

Example

When you come to work at 0845 as you did this morning it causes a problem for me because that's when we meet to plan the day. Starting tomorrow, I would like you to be here at 8:30 AM when we have our team meeting.

That will help me because you will be there to hear our plan for the day and I won't have to come and find you and go over it again later.

Resist the temptation to talk about how they will be better off. That would give the team member an opportunity to start a debate. All they need to know is that you will be better off.

Step Five: Get their commitment

If someone tells you they will do what you ask, there is a greater chance they will do it than if they listen passively. So, Step 5 involves asking the team member if they can and will comply with your request. This is a very powerful step for two reasons. Firstly, doing what you ask may cause a problem for them. If you do not identify and solve that problem, they will not be able to comply with your request. All that will happen is you will walk out of the meeting thinking the team member is going to change their behaviour and when you find out they haven't you will be shocked, disappointed, frustrated and probably very angry. By asking the team member if they will do as you ask, you give them an opportunity to tell you about their problem. Then you can work with them to fix it.

Example

When you come to work at 0845 as you did this morning.

It causes a problem for me because that's when we meet to plan the day.

Starting tomorrow, I would like you to be here at 8:30 AM when we have our team meeting.

That way you will hear our plan for the day and I won't have to go over it again later.

Is it possible for you to be at work at 8:30 AM?

Team member: "Well no. I see it causes a problem for you if I'm not here at 8:30, but I have to wait for my sister to come and collect my four year old and take her to day care and that makes me late."

You: " Could she come earlier?"

Team member: "No."

You: "Well, I see you have a problem but we have to find a solution to it because coming in at 8:45 and missing the team meeting is not acceptable. What are your options? Let's brainstorm them."

I guarantee once the team member knows being late is not an option, with your help they will be able to find a solution to their problem.

If there is no problem, asking the team member if they intend to do as you ask is very powerful because it will be very difficult for them to look you in the eye and say: "No, I won't do what you want me to do." If they do say that, the situation is escalated to a different level, as I will explain shortly.

Example

When you come to work at 0845 as you did this morning, it causes a problem for me because that's when we meet to plan the day. Starting tomorrow, I would like you to be here at 8:30 AM when we have our team meeting. That way you will hear our plan for the day and I won't have to go over it again later. Is it possible for you to be at work at 8:30 AM?

Yes, I can do that.

That's great. Thanks.

Step Six: Summarise the agreement and plan to follow up.

When the team member tells you they can and will make the change in their behaviour you asked for, all you need do is summarise the agreement and arrange a meeting to follow up. Setting a date for a follow up meeting is very important because it lets the team member know you are serious about wanting to see this change in behaviour.

Example

When you come to work at 0845 as you did this morning, it causes a problem for me because that's when we meet to plan the day. Starting tomorrow, I would like you to be here at 8:30 AM when we have our team meeting. That way you will hear our plan for the day and I won't have to go over it again later. Is it possible for you to be at work at 8:30 AM?

Yes, I can do that.

That's great. Thanks.

So to make sure I've got it right, we've agreed that starting tomorrow you will be at work at 8:30 and will be present at the daily team meeting. Do I have it right?

Yes, that's right.

Excellent. Let's get together in two weeks at this time and see how it's going? OK?

That's fine.

Excellent. Thanks for your help in sorting this out.

This last question is a rhetorical question because you are making a statement rather than asking a question. It is just a friendlier way to organise a follow up meeting. Note how the exchange ends on a positive note. You are

being very gracious by thanking them. You will both know you don't have to thank the team member and they will appreciate the gesture. It is important to end the meeting on a firm but positive note. The firmness let' the team member know you are serious. The positive note is what they will remember most about the meeting. This will allow the next review meeting to get off to a good start.

The Six Steps of the DESC Script

Step 1: Describe the behaviour you want changed.

“When you (be very specific)”

Step 2: State the problem their behaviour causes you.

“It causes a problem for me because”

Step 3: Outline the change you would like to see.

“Starting _____ I would like you to”

Step Four: Explain the benefit to you.

“That will help me because”

Step Five: Get their commitment.

“Are you able to do that.”

Step Six: Summarise the agreement and plan to follow up.

“So, just to make sure I've got this right. We've agreed that starting Is that right? Great. Let's get together in two week to see how it's going. OK? Excellent. Thanks for your help in sorting this out.

What if it doesn't work out that well?

Because we don't live in an ideal world, a number of things could go wrong, even if you use the DESC Script properly. But that's OK because we always have a cunning plan!

The first thing that could go wrong is the team member may not be willing to find a solution to the problem that is preventing them from making the behaviour change you want. Another is the team member could simply refuse to make the change you are asking for. The third is they could agree to make the change but then continue behaving as they have always done.

If any of these happen, you must take it very seriously. Once you have identified that a team member's behaviour is a problem, you cannot allow them to continue behaving that way for these five reasons. First, you put your Customers at risk by exposing them to an under-performing team member.

And as you know, it's about the Customer, always! Secondly, you put your team's ability to perform at risk. Thirdly, you threaten the success of your brand and BBRC. Fourthly, you will risk losing respect from the errant team member and others. Fifthly, and most disturbingly, you send a message to all team members that says: “You don't need to take me or my superiors seriously because we don't really mean what we say.”

The Step Approach

If the team member will not or does not change their behaviour, they have escalated the matter to a higher level. The issue you are now dealing with has **stepped up** in severity. It is useful to think of a series of steps or levels so you don't get trapped in dealing with the same issue over and over again. If you let that happen, you allow the team member to stall and the problem will continue, putting more Customers and the success of the business at risk.

Once you recognise the new and bigger problem, you can tackle it using the DESC Script.

Example

You meet with the team member because they come to work late. You use the DESC Script and at Step 5, they identify a problem that prevents them from being at work at 8:30. You brainstorm a number of solutions and the team member rejects all of them and cannot come up with another solution to the problem. The issue now is not coming to work late. It has stepped up to a new and bigger problem: They choose not to solve the problem that prevents them from coming to work. Using the DESC Script, you say:

When you reject every solution to this problem which prevents you from coming to work on time, it causes a problem for me because I now have serious doubts about your willingness to comply with the conditions of employment. Starting right now, I would like you to tell me you are prepared to comply with the conditions you agreed to when you took the job. Then I will believe you really want to work here. Are you able to do that?

You will see the issue is no longer they are coming to work late but your doubts about their willingness to comply with the conditions of employment. When you tell them you want to hear they will comply with the conditions they agreed to when they took the job, they will understand this has moved to a new level and if they continue to be uncooperative, they put their job at risk.

If they say, yes they are able to do that, get their verbal promise they will comply with the rules of employment. Once you get that, go back to solving the problem that is stopping them from coming to work on time. This time round, they will show more willingness to solve that problem because they know if they don't, they will have **stepped up** the problem and put their job at risk.

If they say they are not able to give a commitment to comply with the conditions of employment, you tell them you cannot have someone on your team who will not follow the same rules as everyone else. Again, use the DESC Script to do this – with one variation. This time after describing their behaviour and outlining the problem, you let them know they have a choice to make.

Example

When you tell me you cannot or will not agree to comply with the conditions of employment, it causes a problem for me because I cannot have someone on my team who will not play by the rules. **If you refuse to comply with the conditions of employment, you will not be able to continue working here. So, you have a choice. What would you like to do? Agree to the conditions and behave accordingly, resign or have me start the disciplinary procedure?**

This approach keeps both of you focused on the bigger issue, which is their unwillingness to comply with the rules. It also clearly outlines the choice the team member has and puts the responsibility for their future squarely in their hands. This approach will work equally well with situations where the team member refuses to change or says they will but then doesn't.

And what if they refuse to give you their commitment to play by the rules, or say they will and then don't? They have just escalated the situation. They have **stepped up** to a more serious issue. Again, you would use the DESC Script to deal with this.

Example

Last week you said you would comply with the conditions of employment. One of those conditions is being at work at 8:30. On Wednesday you arrived at 8:45. This causes a problem for me because I can no longer trust you. I would like you to do what you say you are going to do and then I can believe you when you tell me something. Is this possible?

If the answer is 'yes', return to the issue of agreeing to comply with the conditions of employment. If the answer is 'no', tell them you cannot work with someone you do not trust and begin the process to dismiss them.

To sum up

As a manager, your team members are your customers. In a Customer Driven world, we aim to make our customers successful. The purpose behind having tools like the DESC Script and the Step Approach is to assist team members to be successful. But every team member has a choice. They can choose to do those things that will make them successful in your organization or they can choose to do things that will make them unsuccessful. Your team members need to know that if they choose to do the things that will make them successful, you will do everything you can to help them succeed. But if they make the latter choice, your responsibility is to your team's internal and external customers and you will have no choice but to manage them out of the business.