

Supporting Without Rescuing

A practical guide to boundaries, resilience and effective people management

Being a supportive manager does not mean taking responsibility for every difficulty an employee experiences.

Sometimes, the most helpful response is not to provide another solution or more reassurance, but to help someone develop the confidence and skills to manage a situation themselves.

The objective is to combine compassion with clear expectations, professional boundaries and appropriate support.

Good management is neither rescuing nor withdrawing support. It is creating the conditions in which employees can function effectively, access appropriate help and develop greater independence.

IF SOMEONE NEEDS HELP NOW

If there is an immediate risk to life, call **999**. Samaritans are available free, 24 hours a day, on **116 123**. In England, NHS 111 (option 2) connects to an urgent mental health service.

01

Start by understanding what is actually happening

When a working relationship has started to revolve around one person's difficulties, it is tempting to go straight to solutions, or to conclude that the manager simply needs firmer boundaries. It is usually more useful to understand first how the pattern developed.

Questions to ask yourself, or to explore with a manager:

- What happens when the employee becomes distressed? Do they contact you, withdraw, become angry, seek reassurance or involve other colleagues?
- How often are you managing these situations, and how much time do they take?
- What do you think will happen if you don't intervene?
- Do you feel personally responsible for keeping them emotionally stable?
- What have you tried before, and what happened when you tried to set a boundary?
- Is the work itself suffering, or is the difficulty mainly in relationships?

- What impact is this having on the rest of the team?

THE KEY QUESTION

What am I currently doing for this employee that they could reasonably be supported to do for themselves?

That question gets to the centre of the issue without judging either person.

02

Notice when support has become accommodation

Support helps somebody develop the capacity to manage a difficulty. Excessive accommodation can sometimes reduce their opportunity to develop that capacity.

Without anyone intending it, a cycle can form:

Distress

Something at work, or outside it, feels overwhelming.

Turning to the manager

The employee brings it to their manager, often straight away.

Reassurance

The manager reassures them, or resolves the problem for them.

Relief

The distress eases for both of them, so next time the same route is taken.

The manager may be unintentionally rewarding repeated reassurance-seeking, while the employee may be learning that distress is most effectively managed through the manager's involvement.

Importantly, that does not mean the employee is deliberately manipulating anyone. The behaviour may be a learned coping strategy, an expression of genuine distress, or both. Treat the cycle as a possibility to explore, not an established explanation of their behaviour.

A QUESTION FOR THE TEAM

Are our current interventions helping this person become more confident and independent, or are we inadvertently making them more reliant on their manager?

Move from reassurance to problem-solving

When an employee repeatedly brings difficulties to their manager, it can become natural to offer advice, reassurance or solutions.

However, consistently resolving problems on someone else's behalf may inadvertently undermine their confidence in making independent decisions.

Try asking:

- What have you considered doing?
- Have you experienced something similar before?
- What helped you manage it last time?
- What are the two most realistic options?
- Which option do you think would work best?
- What is the next step you could take yourself?

THE PRINCIPLE

Support the decision-making process without automatically becoming the decision-maker.

Use structured, predictable conversations

Where frequent informal conversations are becoming difficult to manage, consider introducing more structured check-ins.

These could be incorporated into existing one-to-ones rather than creating additional meetings.

A simple agenda might include:

1. How are things going at work?
2. Are there any barriers affecting your ability to perform?
3. What support or adjustments would be helpful?
4. What have you already tried?
5. What actions will we each take before our next conversation?

A weekly meeting of 20 to 30 minutes, focused on workload, difficulties, adjustments and agreed actions, gives the relationship a predictable rhythm, rather than one driven mainly by moments of distress.

Not every concern requires an immediate, lengthy discussion. Where appropriate, an issue can be noted for the next scheduled meeting.

However, urgent concerns, safety issues and time-sensitive support needs should always be addressed promptly.

05

Acknowledge distress without assuming responsibility for resolving it

Managers can recognise someone's emotional experience without feeling obliged to provide counselling or personal advice.

INSTEAD OF

"Tell me everything that's happened, and let's work out what you should do."

TRY

"That sounds like a difficult situation. Is there anything affecting your work that I can help with?"

"I want to make sure you're getting the right support. I don't think I'm the best person to advise on that particular issue, but we can look at who might be."

This isn't dismissing the individual. It is recognising the distinction between managerial support and specialist or personal support.

06

Remember that boundaries are not a withdrawal of care

Managers often hold back from setting boundaries because they fear it will make things worse, damage the relationship or lead to a crisis.

But being a good, compassionate manager does not require remaining continuously emotionally available. A manager can be empathetic without becoming a counsellor.

INSTEAD OF

Extended conversations about personal difficulties

TRY

Acknowledging the distress and identifying what support is needed at work

INSTEAD OF	TRY
Repeated reassurance	Helping them identify their own next step
Responding to every non-urgent emotional disclosure as it happens	Agreeing appropriate times and channels for support
Trying to resolve problems in their personal life	Signposting to appropriate personal or professional support
Avoiding difficult feedback because they seem vulnerable	Giving clear, sensitive and consistent feedback

Boundaries work best when they are explained, agreed and applied consistently. A boundary that appears suddenly, after months of open availability, can feel like rejection. One introduced as a better way of supporting someone, with a clear route for anything urgent, usually does not.

07

Build confidence through deliberate practice

Resilience is not simply about encouraging someone to be stronger. It involves developing skills and resources that can be used when difficulties arise.

Three particularly useful approaches are:

Self-efficacy

Help the employee recognise situations they have previously managed successfully.

"What did you do last time that worked?"

Mental agility

Encourage them to consider alternative perspectives rather than becoming fixed on one interpretation.

"Is there another way we could look at what happened?"

Distress tolerance

Encourage the use of existing coping strategies to manage uncomfortable emotions before making decisions, where appropriate.

"What usually helps you when you're feeling overwhelmed?"

Where relationships at work are part of the difficulty, two further skills are worth building:

Emotional regulation

Help them recognise their triggers and early warning signs, and plan how they will respond when they notice them.

"What did you notice building up before it started to feel like too much?"

Interpersonal effectiveness

Support them to communicate their needs, accept disagreement and work through conflict without it escalating.

"What do you need from that conversation, and how could you ask for it?"

There is an important distinction between encouraging someone to develop their own coping strategies and suggesting they should simply become more resilient. The first builds capability. The second places the whole difficulty on the individual, including the parts that may be shaped by management or team culture.

The emphasis is on strengthening practical capabilities, not asking managers to deliver psychological therapy.

A QUESTION FOR MANAGERS

How can we create an environment that supports their existing strengths, while also helping them develop the skills they find more difficult?

08

Be compassionate and direct

Managers sometimes avoid giving clear feedback because they worry that it will undermine someone's confidence or cause distress.

But directness and compassion are not mutually exclusive.

INSTEAD OF

"I'm really sorry to bring this up, and I don't want you to feel criticised, but perhaps we could think about doing something differently."

TRY

"I value the contribution you make to the team. There is one area I'd like us to work on, and I want to be clear about what needs to change and how I can support you."

Constructive feedback can help establish predictability, reduce uncertainty and build confidence.

The aim is to be clear without being unnecessarily harsh.

09

Avoid viewing every situation through an employee's mental health history

When managers know a great deal about an employee's personal or clinical history, they may understandably become more cautious.

Sometimes this is necessary, particularly where there are known risks, agreed reasonable adjustments or specific support plans.

But it can also lead to assumptions about what someone can cope with, even when their current behaviour and performance suggest otherwise.

Before intervening, consider:

- Am I responding to what is happening now, or what happened previously?
- Am I making assumptions about this employee's capabilities?
- What support or adjustments have we agreed?
- Would I ordinarily intervene in this situation?
- Am I allowing the employee to demonstrate their own competence?

Nor do you need to settle what someone's diagnosis is in order to manage well. Describe what you can see, such as reassurance-seeking, sensitivity to criticism or difficulty with disagreement, and leave diagnosis to clinicians.

THE PRINCIPLE

Respond to the present situation, informed by relevant history, rather than automatically anticipating problems.

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Remember that managers need boundaries too

Supporting somebody through repeated periods of distress can have an emotional impact on the manager.

It is important to recognise that managers have responsibilities towards their employees, but those responsibilities are not unlimited.

Managers should have access to appropriate advice, HR support and opportunities to discuss challenging management situations.

They should not be expected to act as therapists, undertake clinical assessments or manage serious mental health risks independently.

A manager can care about someone's wellbeing without carrying responsibility for their entire personal life.

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A simple framework for difficult conversations

Acknowledge

"I can see that this is difficult."

Clarify

"What is the specific issue we need to address at work?"

Empower

"What options have you considered, and what might help you move forward?"

Agree

"Let's identify the next step and agree what support is needed."

This provides a consistent approach while allowing flexibility for individual circumstances.

A REFLECTION FOR MANAGERS

Think about an employee you find yourself supporting regularly.

Are your conversations developing their confidence and problem-solving abilities?

Are you providing support that falls appropriately within your management role?

Are expectations and boundaries clear?

Are you allowing space for independent decisions?

Are you giving direct feedback when necessary?

Effective support should help employees build capability, not make their manager indispensable.