

Managing a problem

Read an email managing the problems faced by a member of an international team.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the text and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the phrases (1–8) with the definitions (a–h).

Phrases

1. to learn the ropes
2. to give someone a heads-up
3. to touch base with someone
4. to feel stretched
5. to feel pulled in both directions
6. to have a smooth-sailing experience
7. to move the goalposts
8. to see the big picture

Definitions

- a. to tell or warn someone that something is going to happen
- b. to have a more complete perspective on a situation
- c. to change the targets or the rules of a situation unfairly
- d. to feel as if people are making difficult demands of you that push you past what you are comfortable doing
- e. to learn the basics of how to perform a job or task
- f. to make brief contact with someone
- g. to be in a situation where you feel loyalty to two opposing groups of people
- h. to be able to progress without much difficulty

Reading text: Managing a problem

From: Jo Backhouse

To: Karl Anderson

Date: 17 October

Subject: Support for Judy

Dear Karl,

I received a call from Judy a couple of days ago to discuss some of the issues that she was having and I thought I'd give you a heads-up on what was said, seeing that you are Judy's project team leader.

Judy really enjoys working with you and the team and finds the project very interesting, but I think she's feeling a bit lost and struggling to see the big picture. It seems that she's been

given a fair amount of autonomy to carry out the tasks that you've given her, and of course this level of delegation is not uncommon in your branch. But I believe in her Tokyo office, she is used to a bit more managerial direction and guidance and so is finding this international project quite daunting.

When I asked her about meeting her deadlines, she mentioned that due to the recent changes to the project timeline, her goalposts have been moved, and she doesn't seem to really understand why this has happened. Bearing in mind that she's also facing simultaneous deadlines from her department in Tokyo, we can presume that she might be feeling a bit stretched.

Looking ahead, I was wondering if we could make it easier for Judy by offering her more direction when setting her tasks, at least until she learns the ropes and gets used to working unsupervised. I think she'd also appreciate you giving her a clearer idea on how her role in the team fits into the overview of things. Do you think you could maybe outline the group and individual targets at your next team meeting and that way, everyone not only gets a reminder of the end goal, but each team member, including Judy, might have a more holistic view of the whole project?

I was also thinking it might help to touch base with her every so often to make sure that she's up to date with any changes to the overall plan of attack. In the meantime, I'll write to her manager in the Tokyo office and see how aware they are of the deadlines you've given her, and if they could in some way review her responsibilities and co-ordinate her tasks so that she doesn't constantly feel pulled in both directions.

Judy is an extremely conscientious worker and is eager to contribute positively to the team. Personally, I think she is someone with high potential and will be an asset to our international projects if properly mentored. I'm keen to know your thoughts on the matter and am open to any suggestions on how we could better support Judy so that she has a more smooth-sailing experience on the team.

Best regards,

Jo Backhouse

Head of Department
International Projects

Tasks

Task 1

Circle the best answer.

1. Why is Jo writing to Karl?
 - a. To suggest that his management style is not suitable for the current members of his team
 - b. To let him know about the issues his team member is facing and help him manage them
 - c. To tell him how to solve his problems
 - d. To ask him to take it easy on Judy and not give her too much work

2. What is Judy not used to?
 - a. Being told what to do
 - b. Collaborating with people internationally
 - c. Being left to do things on her own
 - d. Delegating work to other people

3. Why is Judy confused by the changing targets?
 - a. She feels as if she needs to understand the reason for changes.
 - b. She has simultaneous deadlines from the Tokyo office.
 - c. She doesn't want to know the bigger picture, just her part.
 - d. She doesn't like meeting deadlines.

4. Who might benefit from having a better overview of the project and a better understanding of how the individual tasks fit together to achieve the group target?
 - a. Only Judy
 - b. Judy and the Tokyo office
 - c. Judy and Karl
 - d. Judy and the rest of Karl's team

5. What does Jo think of Judy?
 - a. Judy works well independently but isn't a good team player.
 - b. Judy is lazy and prefers managers to tell her exactly what to do.
 - c. Judy is very hard-working and capable and will go far in the company.
 - d. Judy is very enthusiastic but not very experienced.

6. Which of these does Jo do in her email?
- Mix positives in with the negatives
 - Focus on the solutions
 - Use language to show that she's expressing her own opinion or a possibility and not hard facts
 - All of the above

Task 2

Match the problems (a–d) with the solutions (1–4) that Jo suggests.

Problems

- Judy is feeling stretched with multiple deadlines.
- Judy can't see the big picture.
- Judy is not used to so much autonomy.
- Judy finds the changing targets and deadlines confusing.

Solutions

- Karl could outline the team and individual targets during the next week.
- Karl could give her more direction until she learns the ropes.
- Karl could touch base with her regularly and make sure she's up to date with the changes.
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- Jo could write to Judy's Tokyo office to make them aware of her deadlines and co-ordinate her tasks.

Discussion

How do you deal with problems at work? Have you ever had to write an email similar to this one?

Answers

Preparation task

1. e
2. a
3. f
4. d
5. g
6. h
7. c
8. b

Task 1

1. b
2. c
3. a
4. d
5. c
6. d

Task 2

1. b
2. c
3. d
4. a