

Case study 2 - transcript

Welcome to Case study 2 on undermining and belittling.

The next clip features interaction on a ward between a senior and junior doctor in the same specialty. Watch the interaction between the two, focussing particularly on the body language and non-verbal communication demonstrated.

Junior colleague: Right. I've done all the bloods that you asked for but why do I need to do an oestrogen level on Mrs Pink?

Senior colleague: Right. Okay. Have you organised the x-ray and scan yet?

Junior colleague: No.

Senior colleague: Well, get on with it.

What did you notice about the way the senior colleague communicated? How would you describe her body language?

Some features you may have noticed are closed posture, no eye contact, not inviting conversation, a flat tone of voice, ignoring the question asked by the junior doctor and not using please or thank you.

In the next section of the video think about what impact this communication is having on the junior colleague.

Senior colleague: Leila, you're always complaining that I never let you do anything, so come on let's go and do an ERPC. You have seen one of these before, I trust.

Junior colleague: Yeah. I just did one the other day with Ms Patterson and it went well.

Senior colleague: Really? You do surprise me.

Senior colleague: Well that went well, didn't it? You're meant to dilate the cervix gently. You almost caused a false passage.

Junior colleague: Why is this so difficult?

Senior colleague: Why do you think?

Junior colleague: Well, she'd had previous cervical treatment, maybe that made it harder.

Senior colleague: For you obviously.

Junior colleague: I just thought that would've made it harder, that's what Ms Patterson said to me last week. I don't know. Maybe after I've done a few more things will get easier.

Senior colleague: Let's hope so for your sake.

What words might describe how the junior colleague is feeling at this stage?

How about the following..... upset, under confident, useless, surgically inept, sad, frustrated, angry, confused, determined.

All of these apply, and people will react differently to criticism. However, persistent lack of support when help is required can be very undermining over time. Junior members of staff in all professions may be particularly vulnerable to this and they may be less confident in their abilities.

A phenomenon called 'Imposter syndrome' occurs when people are unable to personally acknowledge their achievements, and become convinced they are frauds who are not deserving of their success.

It is common for junior staff to feel inadequate or unsure when first starting a post.

Senior colleagues must be aware of the impact their comments and communication will have on junior staff, as they will need reassurance and support even if things have not gone well in order to build confidence.

That is not to suggest that one should gloss over or ignore poor performance.

Now let's watch another clip. This shows an example of someone taking credit publicly for another person's work. Whilst watching this video, think how you would feel if you were Chris, and what your actions would be.

Chair: So next item on the agenda, outpatient project, which we're going to need an update on. Oh Chris! Hi, perfect timing. We've just come to the outpatient project, have a seat. Are you ready to give us an update?

Chris: Yes, absolutely. I've got...

Anousha: Martin, can I interject, sorry Chris. I wondered whether some background might be useful here. This is something I was looking at prior to Chris' arrival.

Chair: Okay. Hang on a second, Anousha. Is that alright with you Chris?

Chair: Well, I was going to talk about the background but go ahead Anousha.

Anousha: Well, as you know, the team and I have been looking at how we process referrals and...

Narrator: In the next 15 minutes Anousha gives a complete overview of the background using the information and project plan that Chris had emailed to her. She outlines every aspect of the project as it currently stands and doesn't acknowledge any of Chris' contribution or work. She presents it as her and the teams work and Chris feels unable to interrupt.

Chair: Okay, brilliant. Fantastic progress. Well done Anousha and well done to the team. That looks great so far. Chris is there anything you wanted to add?

Chris: No, thanks. I think Anousha pretty much covered it all.

Chair: Great! Any questions for Anousha?

Meeting participant: No, I think that makes really good sense actually. I think we need to see what comes out of the pilot phase if any issues arise but no, it's good.

Chair: Good. Anything else? Shall we move on? Good. Right. Next item is....

If you were Chris, what would you do at this stage?

- a. Confront Anousha in the meeting and ask why she isn't acknowledging your input into the project.
- b. Interrupt Anousha in order to present your own work.
- c. Ask Anousha after the meeting if you can speak to her in private about her behaviour.
- d. Make sure you tell everyone who was at the meeting over the next few days that actually it was all your work.

- e. Go to the Chair of the meeting to complain about Anousha's behaviour.

Although there will be different ways to handle this situation, you need to think about what you want the outcome to be. It may be that Anousha was not aware that Chris had felt undermined, or felt that she had acknowledged her input adequately.

Either way, unless her behaviour is addressed it is unlikely to change.

Speaking directly to the person in private will usually be the best way to have this type of discussion.

It is important not to be angry or accusatory in this discussion, as this may inflame the situation. Using techniques like 'I' messages (where you explain what your experience and feelings were) can allow you to explain what impact behaviours have had on you.

Alternatively you may wish to wait until a later time in order to allow your conversation to be less emotional. Depending on the situation you may wish to talk to trusted colleagues in confidence before speaking to the individual in question to get another perspective on the behaviour.

Watch the rest of the clip to see how Chris deals with the situation.

Meeting participant: I don't know what to make of...

Chris: Anousha, can I have a quick word please?

Anousha: Well, I've got a meeting. Can you catch up with me tomorrow perhaps?

Chris: No, no. I'd really like to talk to you now, just quickly in the kitchen?

Anousha: Well, okay then, but I've only got five minutes.

Chris: I just wanted to talk about what happened in that meeting.

Anousha: What do you mean?

Chris: Well, I mean it's great that you're so supportive of the project and that we're going to get the go ahead.

Anousha: Yeah, so what's the problem?

Chris: Well, it was mainly that you were presenting as if it was all your own work which I found quite frustrating.

Anousha: Well, I did start the work off you know.

Chris: Absolutely, and if you'd allowed me to present then I certainly would've acknowledged that. I've sent you quite a few emails recently and I've left quite a few voicemails about this meeting but you haven't replied. I mean I know that you're really busy.

Anousha: Well, yes, it's been a bit hectic but I still don't see what the problem is.

Chris: Well, it was just the fact that you're presenting the work as all your own which I found really difficult and it just made me feel so completely unsupported. I just thought "well, if we're going to be working together then I must feel some level of support". But actually the way you presented it made me feel like there was no appreciation of my part in the project at all.

Anousha: Yeah, okay, okay.

Chris: We need to feel that we are supporting each other for it to succeed.

Anousha: Okay. Look, I'm sorry. I don't want you to feel that I'm not keen on making this happen because I am. I guess I've been a bit frustrated about my lack of progress with it mainly because of other things getting in the way. But you're right, I should've acknowledged your role and look, I'm sorry if you think I haven't been very available. How about we have a meeting in the morning? Are you free at 10?

Chris: Yeah, I mean that would be great. Thank you. I do think we really can work together...

You can see that Chris ensures privacy for their conversation. She talks clearly about the aspect of the interaction which has upset her, and explains how this made her feel. She might discuss further how she would like Anousha to address her behaviour.

If this was an isolated episode, this might be sufficient. If undermining behaviour is persistent, then this might need to be escalated further