SOLVING (NOT EXACERBATING) PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

Got a situation where a staff member has repeated errors, incompleteness in work, or other problems of quality? Got a situation where an employee displays behavior that makes them difficult to work with for you or other staff members? These are but a couple of the common situations that show up at work where a performance problem exists.

So what do managers tend to do about these performance issues? You got it. Most commonly they avoid dealing with them, which only makes the situations worse. Or some take a punitive approach as the first real effort to address the problem, writing the person up as discipline or verbally berating the individual. You generally don't find hard-line approaches as motivators that lead to improved employee performance and commitment. If anything, employees tend to not get mad but instead look for those subtle ways to get even-- which will drive you even more crazy.

So what's a manager to do instead of avoidance and punishment? Hello, corrective intervention. In other words, make your first emphasis when a problem situation is developing, especially into a pattern, to work with the employee to create a plan for improvement-- together focus on developing solutions. This article highlights how to do this.

ADDRESS ISSUES AT THE INCIDENT LEVEL

You'll often find that many performance problem situations, patterns of less than a good level of performance, have grown into patterns because little was done when the incidents first appeared. We all on occasion make mistakes or do something in our conduct or work that could be done better. But if you, as my manager, say little to nothing about it, then I think what was done is just jim-dandy. No wonder why incidents can grow into patterns.

To address incidents in performance where improvement is needed, follow this two-step coaching conversation with the staff member:

1) Give the constructive feedback,
2) Have a discussion to work out a solution with the person.

Constructive feedback helps you identify the concern or shortcoming in performance to the person. It is providing specific information focused on the issue of performance and stating the feedback in terms of observations not interpretations. Observations are what was seen in performance rather than
what you think of what was seen, which are interpretations. For example, “You were uncooperative at the staff meeting today” (interpretation). “I noticed at the staff meeting today, that when you were asked for your ideas and for information on your progress with the project, and your responses were either, ‘I don't know,’ or ‘That's not important right now.’ In both cases, we received little information that helped the group” (observations). Observations are like a verbal videotape of what happened in an incident. They're not a right or wrong, just a description of what occurred.

Then, in step two of the conversation, discuss with the employee what that person can do to make the situation work better moving forward. To do this, start the discussion phase with what's called a positive outcome statement. **This statement says in effect to the individual— here's what I want to accomplish in our discussion together that will create a positive effect on your performance.** Tie it to the issue of what your feedback was about and put your wording in the form of encouraging dialogue to happen next. For example, "Joe, let's discuss what you can do to contribute positively and cooperatively for our future staff meetings." This statement points the discussion in a positive direction and sets the tone for constructive problem solving. Then proceed by asking questions to learn what's happened with the person and even more so to get the individual's ideas on how to solve the problem. If you ask a question that involves you - save this for later in the discussion, and ask, "How can I support you to succeed in achieving this goal?" The more you listen than talk at the person, and the more you ask than tell the person what to do, the greater you get the employee involved in shaping a solution and creating a two-way, constructive conversation.

This kind of coaching conversation keeps most incidents from growing into patterns of performance problems. **Remember too, make sure you provide the positive feedback when employees do something well in their performance; that is, specific observations not general praise.** This makes addressing incidents of improvement so much easier to handle when acknowledging how people do in their performance, both pluses and minuses, is a normal practice. It also tells people that good performance counts here, and it's most appreciated.

**WHEN THE INCIDENTS TURN INTO PATTERNS**

Nonetheless, sometimes despite the best of efforts on your part, or because issues have been left unaddressed for awhile, you have a pattern of a problem. Here's how corrective intervention works in these instances.

**You're going to have a meeting with the employee with the purpose of developing a plan together to guide improvement in performance— again the focus is on creating solutions rather than dwelling on problems. To prepare for the meeting, write down the following for yourself: 1) the description of the performance issues, 2) the impact of the problem, and 3) the positive expectations you have for the right level of performance.**

The description of the problem tells in specific, observation-based terms the pattern of what's been happening in that person's performance, which can include conduct. Representative incidents can be cited as examples of the pattern. You want to make sure you're clear on how long the problem has been going on, when any previous conversations about it occurred, and the tendencies that show up...
when the pattern appears. This is then an objective description in a matter-of-fact tone. In explaining the impact of the problem, you're describing briefly how the problem has affected productivity and people-- in a matter-of-fact tone. The purpose of this step is to create awareness and a sense of importance, not to push guilt and blame. In fact, you can state this message to the employee in your meeting as the wrap-up of this explanation, "I want you to be aware of how this problem has been having an impact in less than productive ways so we can work together to change this to make a positive impact in your performance."

The expectation piece defines what you want to see in that person's performance related to the issue, not how to fix the problem. For each issue of deficiency identified, clarify your expectations. A good performance expectation is one sentence stated in positive terms and defines the level of performance needed that you would expect from any employee. For example if the issue dealt with quality and timeliness problems in the person's work, an expectation could be -- Complete all assignments in a thorough and accurate manner within set deadlines on a consistent basis.

Start your meeting by letting the employee know that your focus today is to address a performance problem and, most importantly, to create a solution with the person that helps the individual be successful. This sets a constructive tone for your meeting and lets the staff member know you're here to make good things happen, so stick to that in this meeting.

Then describe the pattern in the performance issues and explain its impact. From there, listen to and not debate the employee, and if you do anything, explore possible causes for the performance problem. You don't need agreement on the problem, just understanding of what's been said. Show understanding too of what that person tells you so you're both listening to each other. Then spend the majority of the time creating the plan for improvement. Let your expectations become the goals for the plan and then add with it the action steps the employee is going to take to meet the goals. Add in anything you can do to provide support. Make this part of the meeting very collaborative where ideas are being exchanged and a solution developed. Then close the meeting on a positive note and set a time to come back for a follow-up meeting to review progress. Have the employee type a copy of the plan for both of you so neither is relying on memory.

**REMEMBER TO FOLLOW UP**

The road map for improvement has been created collaboratively. The plan greatly increases the likelihood of success for that employee. The other key is for you to do follow-up reviews on the plan with the person periodically to check progress. This meeting both reinforces your support and accountability. If the person cannot then succeed, you may need to carry out consequences in the form of discipline. It should not be a surprise nor a punitive action. Consult with the Office of Human Resources if that need arises.

Let focusing on improvement guide your judgment in dealing with these situations, not how comfortable you feel. What we have seen happen with managers over the years who apply this corrective intervention approach is that, when they focus on improvement with employees, most often what they see in performance is ... improvement.

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