

Addressing employee performance problems: 7 steps to success

Counseling employees on how to improve performance is an important part of every manager's job. It's also one of the most difficult. Here's some useful guidance to make the process more productive. Feel free to pass it along to your organization's managers.

Talking with employees about their performance problems can be an uncomfortable moment for any manager. But it's also a crucial part of the job and, if done well, will ultimately make a manager's job much easier.

Here are seven steps to planning and executing such discussions:

1. Schedule the meeting and set the stage. Make clear what the meeting is about and what you want to discuss. Help the employee feel at ease from the outset. But don't get caught up in small talk.

Emphasize that this meeting is important and you want it to be productive. Provide an overview of what you want to discuss. Make it clear you don't expect to do all the talking.

2. Describe the problem. Focus on

the employee's results and behavior in concrete, nonjudgmental terms. Cite specific examples and let the employee respond. Don't throw out vague criticisms without having specifics to back them up. *Example:*

Too vague: "Your work has been sloppy lately."

Specific: "Your last three reports have contained an unacceptable number of errors. Let me show you ..."

If there is more than one problem, address them individually. Don't bring up new problems until you've thoroughly discussed the current one.

3. Reinforce performance standards. Your employee already should know the standards you expect, so review them and then move on.

If the employee challenges the validity of a standard, calmly state your reasons for requiring it, and gently steer the conversation back to the reasons the person didn't comply. If necessary, refer to the job description.

4. Develop a plan for improvement. Your preparation for the meeting

should have included a plan for helping the employee improve. During the meeting, the employee may suggest additional solutions. Agree on a method for improving performance in the short run, and establish some back-up options.

5. Offer your help. Show your commitment by offering to help your employee obtain any necessary training, resources or other assistance to achieve the performance goals. Ask the employee what he or she needs to reach the goal.

6. Inject positive comments if possible. However, don't be inaccurate just for the sake of being kind. If a poor-performing employee must eventually be terminated, a manager's false praise could cause the employee to question the "real" reasoning for the termination. And that could spark a discrimination lawsuit.

7. Emphasize potential. Make sure to tell the employee that you believe in his or her ability to improve performance.

Playing favorites: How to avoid unintended partiality in decisions, reviews

Does your organization's managers "play favorites" with certain employees? Most managers would probably say "no," but people often harbor unconscious perceptions that can influence day-to-day decision-making and job reviews of the employees they manage.

Studies show that several factors unrelated to employee performance can impact evaluations conducted by managers.

Such favoritism—or even perceived favoritism—can lower employee morale and lead to discrimination lawsuits. That's one reason it's important for managers to recognize nonperformance-related perceptions that can unintentionally impact evaluations—for better or worse.

Advice: When giving feedback to employees and doing performance reviews, be aware of these three nonperformance factors that often come into play:

1. Hiring choice. Managers often give better reviews to employees they hire or at least had a hand in choosing. Subconsciously, managers tend to make a greater emotional and professional investment in the success of employees they are responsible for bringing aboard.

2. The mirror. Like the general population, some managers tend to unintentionally identify with people of their own gender, race and socioeconomic class. That may subtly influence judgments about which employees perform better.

3. Personal relationship. Managers may give better job reviews to employees they like, for whatever reasons. For example, personable employees with good communication skills can ingratiate themselves with managers and improve the perception of their actual performance.

Bottom line: Objectively follow perform-

ance evaluation criteria. Challenge your job evaluations, asking yourself whether they are based solely on performance. Don't depend entirely on memory for facts and examples in reviews. Keep a performance log during the year on each worker.

Warning signs

- **You spend more time** supervising certain employees and thinking about ways to enhance their careers.
- **You enjoy talking** to some employees more than others.
- **You dread conducting** certain evaluations but look forward to handling others.
- **You relax when talking** to some employees but feel tense when communicating with others, even those who perform well.