



# Confronting Employee Performance Issues

by Mike Hawkins  
[mike@alpinelink.com](mailto:mike@alpinelink.com)



There are few days that go by as an executive coach that I don't get asked for advice on how to confront an employee performance issue. One of the more challenging issues for many managers is effectively dealing with an employee that isn't meeting performance expectations. The typical situation is an employee who hasn't been meeting expectations for some time. The manager can no longer ignore it and is planning to formally confront the employee. They correctly fear that the conversation will turn defensive with tempers and emotions flaring resulting in acrimony and possible escalation.

This situation deserves two conversations. The first is how not to let a performance issue get to this level in the first place. The second is how to confront the performance issue now that it exists.

The common denominator of both conversations is being a good coach to your employees. Great managers employ a coaching style of management. They continuously work with their employees on their attitude, skills, knowledge, and behaviors, helping them to develop and meet performance expectations. They don't wait until an employee's apathy, lack of knowledge, or self-limiting behavior gets to the point of impacting their performance. Great managers take steps when they first see an issue, or more importantly when they first hire the employee, to ensure the employee is positioned to excel in their position.

Here are eleven steps to follow in enabling your employee to become a top performer.

1. **On-boarding** – When you bring a new employee into your organization, give them a detailed orientation. When I joined IBM, a new hire went through a one-year orientation program. Few companies can afford that any longer, but being handed a new PC and an HR benefits manual is insufficient. Give new employees a comprehensive orientation.
2. **Roles** – People have unique talents, strengths, experiences, and knowledge. Not everyone is cut out for every role. Get to know the individual and put them into the right role to begin with. If their role requires flexibility, at a minimum define their default role. Put guiding constraints on the remaining activities you expect them to engage.
3. **Clear expectations** – People can't be expected to deliver against performance targets they don't understand. Set clear and specific performance expectations. Define leading and lagging indicators of performance that will be measured. Don't measure them solely on lagging results. Measure them on the best practices known to deliver results in the way that is best for the organization.
4. **If you see it, say it** - As soon as you see a performance impacting attitude or behavior, good or bad, say something about it. Look for "coachable moments" that you can leverage. Have regular conversations with your employees about your specific observations. Don't let the perfunctory annual review be the only time you give praise or address performance issues.
5. **Develop a coaching style of management** – Get comfortable in having regular conversations with people about their attitudes, behaviors, and performance. Give frequent feedback and encouragement. Continuously develop people for success. Create a climate rich in feedback that promotes constructive and candid conversation. Make the development of your employees a top priority.
6. **Care** – Be sincere and show genuine concern for your employee's development and success. People are more likely to follow your counsel if they think you truly care about them. Show empathy. Seek understanding of situations and circumstances before reaching conclusions. As the manager, you are entrusted with the care of your people. Care for them.



# Confronting Employee Performance Issues

If an employee falls short of performance expectations and needs to be formally confronted, here are additional steps to follow:

7. **Gain management support** – Review the situation with your manager. Gain their perspective and support for your planned course of action. Don't put your manager in the position of being blindsided by an unhappy employee should the employee escalate the situation.
8. **Stick to the facts** – Avoid being judgmental. Point out specific behaviors rather than generalities. Explain not just the behavior, but the consequences of the behavior. Gain agreement with the employee that the expectations of performance were not met.
9. **Seek understanding** – Look beyond the symptoms for root causes that are causing the undesirable behavior. Explore both mindset and ability issues. Identify the source of the problem that needs to be resolved. Give the employee a way to "save face". They have to live with themselves. Don't destroy their self-esteem. Show empathy. Don't condone their behavior, but allow them to find rationale for it.
10. **Develop solutions** – Help the employee find solutions that give them the best chance of overcoming their shortfall. Gain agreement on the solution they will pursue that gives them the best chance to make the needed adjustments. Set a time frame for the improvement to be made. Offer ongoing help during this period. Don't just throw the problem in their lap for them to fix on their own.
11. **Documentation and follow-up** – Put your recommendations and verbal agreements in writing. Ensure the specific actions to be taken and associated timeframes are understood by both of you. This provides the foundation for coaching during the notice period and facilitates the tracking of improvement. Hold them accountable for the progress that you've agreed upon.

Follow these principles along with your organization's HR policies and performance improvement will no longer be an uncomfortable event, but an ongoing part of your organization's mode of operation.

Mike Hawkins is award winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* ([www.activatingyourambition.com](http://www.activatingyourambition.com)) and president of Alpine Link Corporation ([www.alpinelink.com](http://www.alpinelink.com)), a consulting firm specializing in helping individuals and organizations reach their peak potential.

For this and other Alpine Link articles, visit:

[http://www.alpinelink.com/Leadership\\_Sales\\_Management\\_Consulting\\_Papers\\_Tools\\_Templates.aspx](http://www.alpinelink.com/Leadership_Sales_Management_Consulting_Papers_Tools_Templates.aspx).