



Confronting Employee Performance Issues

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There are very 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 their performance expectations. The typical situation is that an employee hasn't been meeting expectations for some time, the manager can no longer ignore it, and they are planning to formally confront the employee. They 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 being how to confront the performance issue.

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

Here are steps to follow to ensure your employee is destined 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 full one-year orientation program. Few companies can afford that any longer, but being handed a new PC and an HR benefits manual is clearly insufficient and prevents an employee from being the performer that they could be with a more comprehensive orientation.
- 2. Roles** – People have unique talents, strengths, experiences, and knowledge. Not everyone is cut out for every role. Ensure you know the individual and put them into the right role to begin with. If their role includes some flexibility, at a minimum define their default role and put any relevant 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 including leading and lagging indicators. Don't measure people solely on lagging results, especially when the method they might use to get those results has negative consequences for other parts of the organization.
- 4. If you see it, say it** - As soon as you see an attitude or behavior that could lead to a performance problem, say something about it. Look for "coachable moments" that you can leverage. Have regular conversations with your employees and other colleagues as appropriate about specific issues that could impact their performance.
- 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. Don't let the perfunctory annual review be the only time you address performance issues or provide praise. Create a climate rich in feedback that promotes constructive and candid conversation.



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- 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 the situation before reaching any conclusions.

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

- 7. 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.
- 8. Save face** – Give them a way to “save face”. Employees still have to look in the mirror everyday and live with themselves. Be careful not to destroy their self-esteem. Show some empathy and while not condoning their behavior, allow them to find some rationale for it.
- 9. Develop solutions** – Help them find solutions that give them the best chance of overcoming their shortfall. Gain agreement with them on the solution they will pursue that will give them the best chance to make their needed adjustments. Set a time frame for the improvement to be made and offer ongoing help during this period. Don’t just throw the problem in their lap for them to fix on their own.
- 10. Documentation** – Put your recommendations and verbal agreements in writing. Ensure the specific actions to be taken and timeframes are understood by both of you. This provides the foundation for coaching during the notice period and facilitates the tracking of improvement.

Follow these ten 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 president of Alpine Link Corporation, a consulting firm specializing in helping individuals and organizations reach their peak potential. For this and other Alpine Link business articles, visit: http://www.alpinelink.com/Leadership_Sales_Management_Consulting_Papers_Tools_Templates.aspx.