

Employee Performance Correction Part Two

By Cheri Baker, SPHR
Principal, Emergence Consulting

In this second article on correcting performance problems, we'll discuss how to prepare for the discussion with the employee. Having completed step one, you now know in more detail what the specific performance issue is, how it fits into the grand scheme of things, (is it a big problem or a little one), and what your policies are that relate to the issue.

Step one was about getting all your ducks in a row. Step two is about preparing to show those ducks to your employee. Preparation begins with establishing your goals for the performance discussion. I've provided a list that covers the basics.

What are your goals for the performance discussion with your employee?

1. To tell them what their performance was, and how it differs from expectations.
2. To ask them to adjust future performance to meet the expectation.
3. To offer to them whatever support you can in making this adjustment.
4. To explain to them any consequences that will arise should they not make this adjustment.
5. To answer any questions they have about the situation.
6. To keep good notes of the discussion for your records.

Some of you may be asking about number two. Why am I asking this employee to change when I should be telling them to change? The answer is this: You are dealing with an adult, and to ask them to make the change is to show them respect. To order an employee to make a change is an attempt to use your authority position as one of force, and this can be damaging to the relationship. Therefore I recommend you ask for the change you'd like to see. Truth be told there will be consequences should they not make the change, so asking is not being soft, it is merely being courteous. Be courteous please.

You'll also want to check in with your boss or your HR department in most cases if this discussion is going to be part of a formal disciplinary action process. I know this takes time, but each company has its own idiosyncrasies, and it's better to check first than to withdraw later. A quick call with "this is what happened,

this is my plan, do you have any questions?” should suffice if you’ve done your homework.

Here is a template for preparing for the performance discussion. I strongly recommend you complete this template in writing.

1. State the problem clearly in the words you will use when talking to your employee. You will want to use language that is descriptive, but not evaluative. What is the difference? Here is an example:

Descriptive: John, your last three TPS reports were turned in late to accounting. There were also substantial errors on two of those reports. That is what I want to talk to you about today.

Evaluative: John, your reporting skills are terrible. I can’t have you making these kinds of mistakes, they are embarrassing.

Please note that the Descriptive statement stuck to the facts, was specific, and was in no way designed to smash John’s self esteem into tiny bits. Evaluative language is not only harmful to your relationship with the employee, but it is also vague and unhelpful.

2. List briefly any prior discussions you have had about this same problem, and any formal performance documentation that you have about that problem. Use the language you will with the employee. Here is an example:

John, I looked at my notes and it seems that we talked about this same problem back in April. At the time you had a handful of TPS reports that were given back to us from Accounting, and you said you would work on the problem. It has been a couple months, but I am concerned that the quality of your work is slipping.

3. Check in with the employee to see what they think is going on. This is KEY, do not skip it. As soon as the employee feels like this is a one-way tirade, they’ll close down. Examples:

“So, can you tell me what you think is going on?”

“I’m wondering what you think is happening to cause these errors?”

“What do you think is the problem here?”

I realize this seems unorthodox to some, but the truth is that you may not have the foggiest notion of why this employee is making errors. You probably have made inferences: you may think the employee is slacking off, or you

think they are talking on the phone too much, but the truth is you don't really know for sure. Ask. You may get nothing, but you may also get a surprise.

4. Check in with the employee about the impact the problem has on the business, and tell them what the consequences are going to be, either for this time or for next time. Example:

“Well, the reason that these TPS reports are important to the company is (insert reason) and when they are late or incorrect we have to delay billing for our services. And that means that we don't have the cash flow we expected, which really impacts the company.

“Because we've already talked about this once, our performance coaching policy says that I should be giving you a written coaching on this situation. John, because I think you're going to turn this problem around I'm going to delay that step, OK? But if we have similar issues in the future, even if it is a few months from now, I'm going to need to put that written coaching in your file. Do you understand?”

A few things to note on this example: First, because the manager felt strongly this error would not be repeated, she decided not to proceed with formal written discipline. Your company may or may not allow such a delay.

Showing this kind of flexibility can be motivating for an employee with real potential to move past the problem, but it involves a few considerations: First, you must be clear that this is a delay, and the issue will not be ignored a second time. Second, you need to give a clear reason why you have delayed the formal discipline. You'll want to document that reason in case future employees claim unfair treatment. Third, you should be fair. If you skip a step for one employee, will you do it for other, similarly situated employees? Even if you don't like them personally?

5. Offer your support, if appropriate. Examples:

“John, what can I do to help you out here?”

“John, I'd like to sit down with you and review a few of those errors you made. I know you can probably fix them fine on your own, but let's take the opportunity to review them together to make sure you don't have any questions.”

“If there were one or two things I could do to help you out, what would they be?”

7. Conclude with a thank you, next steps, and any follow up items. If the employee is a good performer in other areas and you feel

encouragement would motivate them, mention their good performance in other areas. Examples:

“Thanks for meeting to talk about this; I know this was not an easy conversation to have. As I mentioned, I won’t be putting anything in your formal file this time. Please do let me know if you have any questions for me, OK?”

“Thanks for meeting with me John. I think you have great potential, you’ve been doing great work on the (software) installation, and I think if you can improve your reporting timeliness and accuracy, you’ll be in good shape. Let me know if any questions come up for you later, OK?”

In the concluding article we'll discuss how to navigate the actual discussion, prepare for resistance, and follow up appropriately afterwards.