

Employee Performance Correction Part Three

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In this final article in the three part series on performance correction we'll discuss how to navigate the discussion with the employee, prepare for resistance, and follow up appropriately afterwards.

If you've completed the first two steps, you now have a lot of information prepared about the situation, and you are ready to talk to your employee about improving his or her performance. The first thing to do is take your worksheet from step two and make yourself some notes for the discussion. This can be as simple as taking the statements you wrote out and putting them on a piece of paper. My preference is to list a full topic sentence for each point I'm going to cover and then use bullet points for supporting information. Here is an example:

I want to talk to you today about some problems with your TPS reports:

- Timeliness (3 were late)
- Accuracy (2 had mistakes)

You can use whatever format you like, but I recommend having something in writing when you meet with the employee because you'll want an anchor to keep yourself on topic.

Please note that I have not yet suggested that you prepare a written performance document or disciplinary action form for your employee. Even if you have decided to use formal written discipline, this step should occur after the performance discussion, never before.

Once you have written out your notes for the discussion, take a moment and think about the following:

“Given what I know, what kind of response do I expect from this employee?”

You know your employees, and some will be angry, some will be accepting, and some will be upset and may even cry. Some employees may argue, and it will be your job to determine the following. Is the employee bringing up something I need to investigate? (For example: The TPS reports in question were done by another employee?) Or is the employee disagreeing that the issue is important? (For example: All TPS reports have some errors, so what is the big deal?)

Take a few moments to anticipate the response and come up with a plan for handling the anticipated response. If you are presented with some information

you don't know how to respond to, or information that you need to investigate, simply tell the employee you'll get back to them.

Meanwhile: here are some tips for handling some of the emotional aspects of performance correction meetings.

Crying: There are two helpful things to keep in mind if an employee cries. The first is that you are both human, crying happens, and it is not shameful. Hand the employee a box of Kleenex and wait a moment. The second thing to remember is that you are not to feel manipulated by the crying. You don't need to comment on it, you can simply be present in the moment, give the employee a moment to recover, and then keep speaking. Note: If the employee is so hysterical as to be unable to take in what you are saying, you may want to send them home for the day if your company allows, using whatever policy is applicable. You can also simply say: "I can see this is really hard for you. I'm going to step out for a few moments to give you some time, and then I'll be back in to continue our conversation." Be polite, but firm.

Anger: Anger can arise when the employee feels misjudged or unfairly treated. There are a few things you can do to help diffuse angry feelings in a performance meeting. The first thing is to remain calm and model calm behavior. Therefore if the employee is getting red and starting to steam, simply remain calm and speak in an even tone. If you start to get angry too, all bets are off. Questions can also serve to diffuse anger. For example simply stating "I notice you're clenching your hands and that you seem upset. Why don't you tell me what is bothering you?" Then make note of what they say, jotting down some notes. If the anger begins to escalate, such as the employee yelling, or any sort of physical intimidation – end the meeting. You can do this by standing up, walking to the exit, and saying "You seem to be very upset, and I don't feel comfortable continuing this discussion right now. I will reschedule this discussion." If you feel the employee will be a problem for the workgroup, send them home if appropriate. Reschedule the meeting with backup (your boss and/or a member of HR) and begin that meeting with a discussion of the angry behavior and how it will not be tolerated in the future.

Acceptance: If your employee is accepting of the feedback, be grateful. Accepting tough feedback gracefully is hard to do, and is often the mark of a future top performer. Be sure to thank them for being professional and positive in a difficult discussion.

Withdrawing: Sometimes an employee will withdraw, seeming to not listen. This can also include refusal to make eye contact or complete silence. Withdrawal usually means the employee is embarrassed by the situation and/or they don't feel there is any use to them responding. Sometimes it means they are thinking "It doesn't matter what I say, he/she will just say I am wrong." While withdrawal is common, you can help engage the employee by asking questions. Questions such as "What do you think is going on here?" "What do you think

would make this situation better?” and “Do you have any feedback for me?” can sometimes help.

Once you have your notes and have anticipated the response you may get, the next step is simply to have the discussion. Find a private location, get to the point of the meeting in the first couple sentences, and leave some pauses in there for the employee to respond. Take note of their responses. Here are some things that I keep in mind during performance discussions that help me get through them:

- Everyone needs performance correction from time to time.
- I am helping this person’s career by giving them timely feedback.
- It is OK for me to ask for improvement and still be supportive.
- If I ignored this conversation because it was hard for me, I’d be doing this person a disservice.
- I’ll be helping this employee, our customers, and my company by having this conversation.
- I can be open to feedback while still being firm when necessary.
- I respect this employee, and I can have this conversation while treating them with the highest respect.
- Even if it doesn’t go perfectly, I know I’ve done my best.
- Once I’ve done my part, the rest is up to them. I can only point the way.

Once you have finished the discussion, make some notes about what you said, what they said, and what your follow up items are (both for you and the employee). Put these notes in a confidential file. In most cases I’d recommend you meet with the employee within 2-4 weeks to check in on the issue, something as simple as “I’ve noticed there have not been any more errors on those TPS reports, and I wanted to say thank you!” And if the problem recurs be sure to go right to the next step. You put a lot of hard work into this meeting, and you don’t want to lose it by letting things slide afterwards.

Good luck! I’m going to end this post with some sentence starters that may be helpful if you experience arguments or defensiveness in the performance discussion.

Sentence Starters: Argumentativeness or Resistance in Performance Correction:

Pointing to the Mistakes of Others:

“I understand that you are saying that others have made similar mistakes. I am not asking you to be responsible for the mistakes of others, but I do need you to correct your own.”

“Yes, I am aware that others have made similar mistakes. However we’re here today to talk about the mistakes in your report, not other people.”

“Thank you for pointing out that others may be making similar errors. I’ll follow up on that. But for now I’d like to talk about the mistakes in your reports.”

“I understand you may not see me talk to others about their performance. This is because I do all performance correction in private. I think it’s important to respect you by holding this conversation confidentially. I do the same for the rest of the staff.”

Discounting the Mistakes:

“So, are you saying that it is OK that we make these kinds of errors in the department?”

“What will be the consequences to our customers/peers/etc if we keep making these kinds of mistakes?”

“Actually, doing an excellent job on these reports is very important. Here is why:”

“I hear what you are saying. However I need to tell you that this work is very important, and it needs to be done correctly. It is not OK if we make mistakes. Do you understand why?”

Arguing on trivial facts/changing the subject:

“Yes, I understand that you didn’t get the confirmation call from Accounting. I’d recommend that you remind them that you appreciate those calls. However the reports are always due on the same day, so the fact that you didn’t get the call doesn’t mean that we can turn in our reports late.”

“I hear what you are saying, but it doesn’t change the fact that....”

“Can you tell me how the problem with the copier machine prevented you from turning in your work on time? Could you have used a different copier?”

“I hear that you are upset about (X). However today I really want to talk about (Y). We can set another time to discuss (X) if you would like.”

These are just a few examples of how to “bring the subject back” to the topic at hand. However keep in mind to model good behavior even while changing the subject. Use good listening skills, good eye contact, and don’t interrupt people mid-sentence unless there is no other way. You say as much by how you speak as by what you say.

Performance correction is a delicate leadership art. By treating the process with the care it requires, you’ll be more than just a manager; you’ll be changing employee lives for the better while simultaneously improving business results. Best of luck to you.