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Coaching Techniques for Dealing with Underperformers

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Introduction

People do not perform at their job for one of two reasons: either they can't or they won't. Think about that for a minute. There is a world of difference between the two reasons.

If they can't do their job, it likely indicates a simple lack of skills or knowledge. This type of employee is coachable and usually easy to work with.

The second type of employee is the one we will address in this article—the employee who chooses not to do his or her job for whatever reason. These employees are either unsure of what is expected of them, or they refuse to do the job. The former situation is easier to address; the latter is a candidate for progressive discipline, which we will discuss later in this article.

Why are employees who refuse to do their jobs so tough to deal with? As managers, we:

- Expect them to read our minds and know what is acceptable
- Expect people to change on their own
- Expect them to look around and see what others are doing
- Cross our fingers and hope they just “get it”

As managers, what might we be doing wrong? We may be:

- Unsure of our own standards
- Unclear in our expectations and consequences of not following through
- Afraid of what Human Resources (HR) might say
- Afraid the employee will get upset and turn it into a confrontation
- Not sure what to say or how to say it

How, then, do we deal fairly and firmly with underperforming employees? The secret is to give effective feedback on a regular basis, link that feedback to a 6–12 month coaching plan, link individual coaching plans to your company's performance review process (if you have one), and, if the situation warrants, link that to progressive discipline.

First of all, let's be clear on what you can and cannot address as a manager. You have the right to address employee behavior and performance at work as often as you want and whenever warranted. Why employees behave a certain way or choose to perform at a certain level is their choice, but there are consequences to these choices. But we are not psychiatrists, and why people behave outside what is acceptable at work should be left to the experts to address. We can, however, expect and demand acceptable behavior and performance at work.

How to Give Feedback to an Underperforming Employee

Feedback takes many forms. There is the written, formal feedback that takes place once or twice a year; informal feedback, like a thank you for a job well done; and behavioral feedback meant to improve employee performance, which we will address.

The objective of behavioral feedback is to let employees know the impact of their behavior on the workplace, the team, or customers. Positive feedback is given when employees are doing a great job; corrective feedback is given when they are not. If we intend to give either type of feedback to employees, we need to ensure that we are being as clear as possible.

Examples of ineffective ways to give feedback include:

- Being personal
- Giving feedback in public
- Not being factual
- Giving a subjective opinion
- Waiting until weeks or months after the fact
- Not being specific
- Providing feedback on issues over which the employee has no control
- Verbally attacking the employee

Examples of effective ways to give feedback include:

- Keeping the feedback to behavioral issues
- Giving it in private
- Providing it with the intent for improvement
- Giving it in a timely manner
- Being specific
- Keeping the content to issues the employee can control

How do we give corrective feedback to underperforming employees so that we get their buy-in and do not put them on the defensive? The next section provides a four-step model for doing just that.

A Four-Step Model for Giving Corrective Feedback

1. Just the Facts – Give a clear behavior description

A behavior description is simply stating exactly what you saw or heard: just the facts. It is very difficult to argue with a good behavior description since you will be stating exactly what was said or done without giving any judgment or conclusion.

For example, imagine you have an employee who is constantly late for meetings. If you were to say “You are always late for meetings, and I want it to stop,” the employee would likely respond with something like, “No, I’m not, I was on time two weeks ago.” Before you know it, you’re into an argument and off-track.

A much better approach might be to say, “I noticed that you were 15 minutes late last Friday, you were 10 minutes late Tuesday, and you were 15 minutes late today.” If true, it is impossible

to argue with. The employee might try to justify why he or she was late but cannot argue with the facts. This approach separates the behavior from the person and makes the discussion more impersonal.

Two key benefits to sticking to observable facts are that the approach 1) is much less confrontational and avoids putting the employee on the defensive, and 2) ensures that there is no misunderstanding around your concern.

2. Your Reaction – How does the behavior make you feel as the manager?

How, as a manager, does the behavior make you feel? Are you happy, frustrated, angry, embarrassed, or thrilled? It is important that your employees know how you feel; you are the boss. They may have no idea that you are upset or angry about a certain behavior until you tell them. They may try to dismiss the concern, but they cannot argue with how you feel.

3. Impact – What is the impact of the behavior on the larger picture?

What is the impact on morale, the team, customers, and the company? Some employees may be shocked by the impact their behavior has on other people. By describing the impact, you are giving the behavior importance.

4. Request – What do you want to see happen?

Make your request a question, not an order, since having the employee come up with the solution will result in much better buy-in. Also, if the employee does not follow through and change, you have every right to challenge them. It's quite difficult for an employee to explain why they did not follow through on their own plan.

Two examples of the four-step model follow.

Example 1

"Jared, let me tell you what I've heard. Yesterday I overheard you telling a customer on the phone that they were wrong, and just now I heard you tell a customer to call back because you are busy (**facts**). I'm concerned about company image (**reaction**). Talking like that to customers will give a poor service image and likely lead to complaints to management (**impact**). What do you suggest you do to address it?" (**request**)

Example 2

"Bernice, we need to talk about what I just saw. I saw you yelling at Tammy in the project meeting, and you also told her to stay out of the project finances (**facts**). I'm upset (**reaction**). Acting like this in meetings causes tension within the team, and I'm concerned the team will shut down and not give ideas in the future (**impact**). What can we do to resolve this?" (**request**)

Tips on giving feedback

1. Practice first with someone you trust in order to get feedback on your feedback. Ask them to argue, make excuses, and play "what if" games.
2. Write down what you are going to say.

3. Don't allow yourself to get sidetracked from your objective of coming up with a plan to correct negative behavior. It is very easy to get into problem-solving technical issues, exploring excuses for behavior, or being put on the defensive yourself. Some employees will take the approach of "the best defense is a good offense" and try to argue their way out of it. Keep your objective in mind!

How to Negotiate Coaching Plans with All Employees

What is coaching?

Coaching is a process that involves working with someone on a one-to-one basis to help that person achieve a desired result. It is the skill of providing feedback, direction, and support. The goal of coaching is to help the person develop the skills necessary to resolve their own problems in order to build self-esteem and confidence.

Managers should negotiate coaching plans with each employee and link these coaching plans directly to performance reviews so that there will be no surprises come performance-review time.

By taking the role of a coach, you tap into the self-motivation of the employees to become part of the solution; coaches collaborate with others to develop their potential, thus building employees' self-confidence.

Some managers avoid the coaching approach because it takes time, while others simply do not see that developing others is their job. Ultimately, the consequence of not coaching is that employees never reach their potential, and the organization suffers as a result.

Why coach?

You coach employees to develop them or to correct a problem. Underperformers fall into the second category.

Advantages of coaching

Coaching . . .

- Tests employee potential
- Increases confidence
- Allows managers to delegate
- Ensures that your standards are met
- Develops your staff
- Corrects a problem

Disadvantage of coaching

Coaching takes time and effort.

Some of the key steps in becoming an effective coach follow.

1. Know yourself and others

We are all different. One of the greatest challenges that faces us today is to recognize strengths and weaknesses in each person and adjust accordingly. Some people are quiet and

more introspective, while others are more gregarious; some are very open and confident, while others are defensive and harder to deal with. Recognizing these differences will help the coach adjust and adopt his or her approach. Remember, the goal of coaching is to create a climate that encourages a change in performance. Employees all learn and absorb information differently. It is for this reason that they must be involved in deciding what works best for them.

2. Describe the performance gap and its consequences

Highlighting one specific area at a time so that the person does not feel overwhelmed. Be specific about the behavior or performance area you want to discuss and why you think it will benefit the person's development. Let the employee know clearly what any consequences of his or her behavior could be.

3. Give initial feedback

It is important that you are clear, specific, and behavioral. Use the feedback approach described previously.

4. Involve the employee in determining a solution

We are more committed to solutions into which we have input. It is for this reason that you need to be open to involving the employee in the solution. The solution may be painfully obvious to you, but let it come from them.

Coaching opportunities grow out of relationships that are built on mutual trust and respect. This does not happen by accident. This may not be present in the case of underperforming or difficult employees, so you must set clear expectations and deadlines and use necessary resources. Establish trust and respect by giving ongoing feedback and personally recognizing and reinforcing well-done work.

5. Encourage and express confidence

Remember, the overall purpose of coaching is to engage employees in a process of striving toward optimal performance that will benefit the organization as well as themselves. Your confidence in them will build their own confidence. By closing on a positive note of support, you help motivate people to succeed.

6. Give ongoing feedback

Employees who receive consistent support from others respond more positively to developmental feedback when it becomes necessary. As a coach, you use your feedback skills to teach, guide, encourage, and refocus your employees. It is important to constantly encourage and reinforce the attempt to change performance. Your employees deserve an honest reaction from you. As a coach, you need to guide them back onto the right track if they lose their focus. Without ongoing recognition, they could lose heart and give up before they have changed for the positive.

7. Follow up

This is a formal process that involves a meeting with the person to review and summarize the initial performance gap, how it has been resolved, and the effect it has had on them as well as the organization. This confirms that your coaching effort was not just lip service—you take this seriously. And it also sends a clear message that you do expect to see your standards met in the organization and are committed to working with others to ensure that this happens.

Preparing for a coaching meeting

- Know your standards and expectations
- Determine any skill or knowledge gaps between what you expect to see and the actual performance
- Try to determine the cause of the problem

Conducting the coaching meeting

- Be sure that the employee knows this is a development opportunity, not punishment
- Give feedback on performance
- Have the employee come up with proposed solutions
- Listen carefully
- Settle on a plan and set small goals

After the meeting

- Follow up regularly
- Give ongoing feedback
- Possibly set up a buddy system with an experienced team member

When to Move to Progressive Discipline

In some cases, employees refuse to get on board despite your best efforts. If you have been clear in your standards and your expectations, and the employee still refuses to cooperate or alter his or her behavior and performance, then they have made his or her choice. Employees are adults, and as adults we all make choices, sometimes to our own demise. The reality is that some employees will never meet your standards, and you must deal with it.

Some reasons for progressive discipline

- Tardiness
- Absenteeism
- Poor performance
- Stealing
- Lying
- Breach of confidentiality
- Inappropriate dress
- Inappropriate language
- Credit card abuse
- Fraud
- Internet abuse
- Conducting personal business at work
- Telephone abuse

You will have discretion in how to deal with some infractions; others will be completely out of your hands. Breaches such as stealing, lying, fraud, violence, dress, and harassment will be dealt with by HR and the organization, since most companies have clear policies on such infractions.

For some infractions, such as instances of consistent underperformance, tardiness, and language, you will have considerable latitude, and, as a manager, you are expected to deal with them yourself.

The following is a four-step progressive discipline approach to dealing with such infractions.

1. An off-the-record chat

This is not the typical first step of progressive discipline, but you may find that, after a clear chat with a problem employee, the behavior ends immediately and you may not need to go to the next steps.

For an off-the-record chat, bring the employee into your office and close the door. This alone will send a clear message that you mean business.

The tone of the meeting can be light to very stern, depending on the situation, but at a minimum, you must discuss and get clear understanding on three things. First, be specific about the problem behavior using your behavior description techniques. Second, set very clear expectations. Third, be clear on the consequences if the behavior continues. If you are unsure of the company's position on consequences, have an off-the-record talk with HR. (Give HR and your boss a heads-up that you are having this chat.)

Note that "off-the-record" does not mean undocumented. Be sure to write down everything that was discussed and when and what, specifically, was agreed upon. In the uncomfortable event that the legal department and the courts eventually get involved (not likely, but be safe just in case), take detailed, specific notes. Put them in a file and hope you never have to see them again.

2. Verbal warning

If your off-the-record chat does not work and the employee is not improving, then you need to get HR involved and move to the first formal step of discipline: a verbal warning. Many companies have verbal warning forms for this purpose. HR will explain the steps and will likely run the meeting with the employee and you. Verbal warning forms go in the employee's file and are signed by all parties. If the employee refuses to sign, this can be noted on the form.

3. Written warning

If the problem stays the same or worsens, you move to the written warning stage. Similar to the verbal warning, written warning forms are handled by HR, go in the employee's file, and specify what is expected regarding behavior and performance as well as the consequences of not improving.

4. Suspension or termination

The last step is letting the employee go. Some infractions bypass the first three steps and call for immediate suspension or termination, such as violence, stealing, or lying. HR manages this, and company security or the police may be involved. By this time, the problem is clearly out of your hands, except for providing evidence or information.

Summary

We have seen when, why, and how to give feedback to underperformers and how to link daily feedback to your coaching plans. We have seen how and when to act as a coach. If employees choose not to meet minimum standards and perform adequately, then we need to take progressive steps to protect the organization and other employees.

We have seen that managing employee performance and behavior is your responsibility, but responsibility for following it through rests with the employee. As the old saying goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Employees make choices about their behavior and performance, and if they choose not to live within the boundaries set by you and the organization, then you need to cut your losses and find an employee who will. After all, there are plenty of good, ethical people out there who would go to work every day wanting to do a good job for you.

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Steve Lemmex is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) with 19 years of experience as a Management Trainer and Project Management consultant. He was owner and manager of Lemmex & Associates Limited, a consulting firm that offered more than 60 management, business, and interpersonal skills courses to both the private sector and government. He authored Global Knowledge's *Management and Leadership Skills for New Managers*, *Advanced Management and Leadership Skills*, and *Communication and Negotiation Skills* courses. Steve has taught more than 2,500 custom and public courses for thousands of participants in North and South America.