

# POSITIVE STEPS FOR ADDRESSING PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

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All of us have crossed paths with an employee with performance problems. These problems can take many forms, but whether we have worked beside such individuals or supervised them, we know the signs - habitual disregard for workplace policy, work that is flawed more often than it is correct, inability to keep up the pace the job requires, perpetual tardiness, perhaps a pattern of Monday and/or Friday absences from work, and on and on.

There are two ground rules for supervisors to keep in mind regarding their employees' performance problems:

**Rule #1 Employee performance problems rarely improve without supervisor intervention.**

Tempting as it may be to let things work themselves out, they generally don't. One exception to this rule might be problems resulting from interpersonal conflicts between employees. Faced with this situation, the wise supervisor should allow the employees in question some time to resolve the matter themselves. If they are unable or unwilling to do so, in the end the supervisor may become involved, but having a supervisor in the middle of these types of conflicts sometimes results in further muddying of the waters.

**Rule #2 All employees in the work group are generally aware of the performance problems of a particular employee.**

Thus, all eyes are on the supervisor to take corrective action. By failing to intervene, the supervisor's credibility with other employees is seriously at risk. Furthermore, supervisor inaction sends the message to other employees that this substandard behavior is somehow acceptable, or at least will be tolerated, which threatens to lower overall standards for the work group.

The obvious implication for supervisors of employees with performance problems, whether they like it or not, is to take corrective action - and quickly. The supervisor's goal in addressing problem behavior should always be to rehabilitate the employee, not to get rid of him or her. Such problem behavior is much easier to remedy if it is "nipped in the bud". Allowing problems to fester before they are addressed significantly increases the difficulty of bringing the employee back on track.

The first step for the supervisor to take in addressing problem behavior is to pull the employee aside and simply mention that he has noticed that the employee has "gotten off track" and let the employee know of his concern. Sometimes merely calling the issue to the employee's attention in this manner is all it takes to get the behavior corrected.

If the situation does not improve following this discussion, a more formal meeting between the supervisor and employee is in order. This meeting should be documented on paper, with the documentation containing the following information: the nature of the concern; steps to improve performance - which ideally has been agreed to by the employee and the supervisor; and the consequences that will follow if improvement does not occur. Another essential component of the documentation is the inclusion of both the supervisor's and the employee's signatures. Often, employees will balk at signing such a statement; however, by signing, they are merely acknowledging that the information was discussed with them, not necessarily that they agree with it. Some employees may wish to make their own comments on the documentation form, in which they may state their disagreement with the situation. Although their remarks may be distasteful to the supervisor, employees are entitled to make such comments. Following the meeting, all documentation should become a part of the employee's personnel file.

Unfortunately, documenting discussions regarding performance problems is often overlooked by managers. There are two reasons documentation is essential. First, if the problem behavior is not corrected and the employee is ultimately terminated, the documentation becomes vital to substantiating the employer's termination decision. Secondly, outlining performance discussions on paper minimizes the possibility of misunderstanding that often occurs with verbal communication. By spelling the situation out in writing, the supervisor ensures that the employee is clear about the problem and, most importantly, the consequences if the problem is not corrected.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to determining consequences if problem behavior does not improve. Rather, each situation must be considered separately, with the supervisor taking care to be consistent in assessing consequences for the same types of infractions. For example, it generally would not be appropriate to demote an employee for low productivity if the supervisor recently provided additional training to another employee with the same problem.

If performance does not improve, subsequent discussions may be held with the employee, with more severe consequences being imposed. The final step, carried out if problems are not corrected, is termination. Contrary to popular belief, there is no magic number of written warnings that must occur before an

employee is terminated. For example, an employee found to be embezzling from his employer would likely be terminated much more quickly than an employee with work quality problems. Again, however, the supervisor should strive for consistency in her handling of similar problems.