Overcoming Barriers

Supervisors have a legitimate right to initiate a series of corrective actions with a worker whose performance begins to decline. Confronting a worker can be constructive when a caring but firm attitude on the part of the supervisor is coupled with an offer of assistance.

Supervisors must be ready to cope with the employee’s resistance, defensiveness, and even hostility. If you sense any of these attitudes, it is a good idea to start the conversation with something other than job performance issues. An effective method of overcoming some of these defenses is for you, the supervisor, to talk about your own feelings first. Without moralizing state how the situation makes you feel. (Additional suggestions for use in this situation follow.) Once you initiate the conversation and feel you have a reasonable exchange that is not overly emotional in process, proceed to specific job performance issues that you feel need attention. It is also very important in these situations to be well prepared so that you can be very specific about the behavior or issues you want to correct. Should the employee still want to lead the conversation astray at this point and either talk about or blame this situation on personal problems, a legitimate and effective approach to finalize the focus is to say: “It is possible that personal problems may be contributing to your performance problems. I strongly urge you to get help by contacting the EAP (if available) or a community help program (have a list handy). Now we need to address the workplace issues for which you and I are responsible.”

Guidelines for Dealing with Communications Barriers

If you feel the employee is still not open to the discussion, we suggest you read through the following suggestions. Then briefly revisit what you have already said, decide which approach may not have had the desired effect, pick out others to use, note the “DOs” and “DON’Ts” in the appendix, and carry on the discussion.

**Talk about your feelings first. State how this situation makes you feel.**
- Don’t diagnose their problems.
- Be firm, but let them know you want to help.
- Be honest and be consistent.
- Accept no excuses for failure.

**Get them to acknowledge and admit they have a problem.**
- Get them to tell you the nature of their problem if they will do it willingly.
- Don’t make value judgments or moralize.

**Don’t let them box you into a corner.**

**Don’t let them threaten you with upper management/union.**
- As the supervisor, don’t make disciplinary threats.

**Never ask WHY they do things. “Why” serves as an excuse.**
- Indicate your concern and desire to get the problem worked out for the sake of the employee, along with indicating your willingness to get involved.

**Gain a commitment from the employee.**
- Monitor that commitment.

**Let them know there is no excuse for prolonged, impaired job performance.**
- Reinforce the fact that it is their responsibility to improve job performance by seeking appropriate personal or job related help.
Examples of Employee Behavior Modification Meeting Barriers & Responses

Employees often become defensive so it is especially helpful to stay focused on job performance and conduct. While it is important to be understanding, it is not your job to counsel the employee about his or her personal problems. The goal of your meeting is to discuss and find solutions to the job performance problem.

Being aware of the potential barriers is the best way to decrease the chance of a negative reaction. The following information provides guidance on how to respond to some of the most common barriers that arise when addressing employee problems.

Chapter 12, Tips for Behavior Coaching, supplies actual forms that can be used to prepare for the meeting. Of course, you may either use them as is, or modify them to suit your needs.

Denial

The employee denies that the problems exist and insists that the supervisor or someone else in the company is out to get him or her.

How to respond:

Stay calm. Have documentation of the employee’s job performance and/or conduct in hand, and keep the conversation focused on performance issues.

Threats

The employee threatens you or the organization.

If you push me, I’ll go to an attorney ... make a scene in the plant ... quit here and now.

How to respond:

Remind the employee that he or she may freely choose an action or response. However, as a supervisor, your responsibility is to uphold the organization’s policy and find a solution that will help both the organization and the employee.

If, at this or any other point, you are not able to remain calm and think you might be losing your objectivity, seek the help of another supervisor, manager or HR representative if available. This playing field must be kept level and there are times when even the most controlled supervisors become emotional and are not able to hide their feelings.

Rationalization

The employee tries to avoid the issue by making excuses.

If this job wasn’t so stressful, I wouldn’t be making so many mistakes and wouldn’t be late so often.

How to respond:

Stay focused on work performance. Avoid being distracted by excuses; let the employee know that their performance is not acceptable no matter what their opinion, and offer any community service or EAP help that is available.

Angry Outbursts

The employee becomes angry. He or she may cry, yell, or scream. This emotional outburst is intended to scare off the supervisor and cause him or her to drop the whole affair.

For instance, the employee states in a shouting voice with arms raised — How dare you accuse me of being late to work and not getting my deliveries made on time!

How to respond:

Do not react! Wait until the employee has run out of steam and then continue where you left off; keeping the focus on performance issues. If the employee continues to carry on, suggest they re-think the situation and reschedule the meeting for the next day.
Crying/Very Emotional Response

Don’t say: Oh! Now stop that, or I know just how you feel.

How to respond:

Do say: Don’t be embarrassed; it’s perfectly okay to need a few minutes. Take your time; we’re in no hurry. This gives people an opportunity to gather their thoughts and calm down. They are usually ready to continue in a few minutes. If necessary, ask them if they would like a couple of minutes by themselves and leave the room for a very short period (a few minutes).

Hostile Interviewees

A person may become hostile because of the way a question is phrased, especially if the question seems invasive or is perceived as a threat, be careful of tactics which may add unnecessary pressure. If an employee is or becomes hostile, allow them to vent their feelings or “get it off their chest” while you remain calm, open and respectful. Remember to simply remain calm and listen to their words carefully. It will be up to you to differentiate the emotions from the actual issues so you can address them after the employee has vented their emotions. The following questions are helpful in promoting a calm exchange:

- You seem very upset; would you like to talk about it?
- It seems like you are very angry; would you like to discuss it?
- You appear to be very angry right now. Can you tell me why?

Intervention Interview Dialogue Suggestions

Many supervisors report that starting a conversation with an employee about a performance problem is often the most difficult step. You may feel unsure about what to say or how to say it or you may find yourself wanting to avoid the discussion altogether. The following are examples of how to begin and end a conversation.

Supervisor:

Pat, I want to talk to you about my observations regarding your work. You have been a good employee in the past, but lately I’ve noticed changes in your work performance. I want to make you aware of my concerns and hear from you as well, because it is important that you correct the problems as soon as possible.

Employee:

Well, I’ve just been tired lately ... I know I’ve been late a couple of times.

Supervisor:

(Refer to specific documentation of Pat’s job performance in the past month.) Actually, you have been late 10 times in the last month, your productivity is down 25 percent, and you have called in sick three times in the past three weeks, always on Monday or Friday. Has anything about your job changed that could explain these problems?

Employee:

What do you mean?

Supervisor:

For instance, are you having trouble with a specific job-related task or routine (or with a co-worker that would cause your productivity to be down?)

Employee:

I don’t think so. I mean there are certain people I don’t really get along with, but that’s not what makes me late. I’ve been having problems at home. I guess it has been affecting work more than I thought. I get the message. I’ll try to do better.

Supervisor:

Pat, it is important that your work performance improve. I will give you two weeks to correct the behaviors I mentioned before taking further disciplinary action. In the meantime, I want to remind you that the community self-help or employee assistance program, (whichever is available), is available to you if you need help with personal problems that are affecting your job performance. I would like to meet with you 2 weeks from Thursday and review your job performance again. Between now and our next meeting, I expect you to be present at work and on time every day. If your attendance and tardiness don’t improve, we will discuss further disciplinary actions at that time.
Supervisor Ending Techniques

Chose one that suits your situation

A. Offer to answer questions. Be sincere in the desire to answer questions and be sure to give the interviewee adequate time to ask. Do not give a quick answer to their first question and then say: “Is everything clear? If you have any questions, please ask me?”

B. Use clearinghouse questions. The clearinghouse question allows you to determine if you have covered all topics or answered all the interviewee’s questions. Usually this is done by combining your “exit” remark with an inquiry such as: “I think that takes care of everything. Do you have any questions?”

C. Declare the completion of the interview. The interviewer should actually mention that the end of the interview is at hand. For instance: “I know we both understand the importance of improving upon the performance indicators I’ve listed here for you. If you will sign this agreement, then I believe we’ve completed today’s session.”