

# How to Approach Employee Performance Problems

Dealing with performance problems is one of the most common and challenging tasks you face as a manager. At some point, you'll probably need to talk to an employee about a performance issue.

## How should I prepare for the discussion?

- **Identify the work performance issue.** Is there a decline in productivity? Are mistakes being made? Are there attendance issues? Does the employee have a difficult time interacting with others in an appropriate manner?
- **Consider first whether the problem could stem from a skill deficit or lack of training.** Is there any misunderstanding about job expectations? If any of these are the case, consider options for improving performance. For example, training, mentoring, or a change in work responsibilities.
- **Beyond this, don't try to diagnose or make assumptions.** Be cautious about making personal judgments about the employee's situation. Keep your focus on the job performance or work behavior. Don't try to guess what's going on in the employee's life.
- **Consult with your manager or Human Resources contact.** Review your company policy prior to speaking with the employee. Be sure you have documented the specific performance problems.
- **Have a plan for possible next steps.** Determine what the consequences will be if your employee fails to resolve the performance issue.
- **Select appropriate time and place to have a discussion.** Choose a time and place where you can speak with your employee uninterrupted and away from coworkers. Though this may be an uncomfortable conversation, do not put it off until the problem escalates further.

## Tips to keep in mind when speaking with your employee

- **Validate the relationship.** Acknowledge the person's accomplishments, length of service, and position within the company.
- **Clearly state the problem.** Be objective and factual. Don't express the problem with emotion. Be calm and even-tempered when addressing the performance issues. For example, instead of saying, "I'm sick and tired of you missing work and constantly messing up on your assignments," you could say, "Since April you have missed 13 days of work and we've received 10 complaints about errors in..."
- **Focus on observable workplace behavior.** Don't make reference to suspected personal, emotional, alcohol or drug related problems in the meeting. If your employee brings these topics up, it's fine to respond but your discussion should center on the observable workplace behavior.
- **Ask the employee to share their perspective.** After you've described the specific issues, ask the employee to respond to this feedback.

### Get the employee's input at each stage.

An employee's views should be consulted at each stage of performance management. This includes setting goals and objectives and deciding how to measure them. It also includes identifying areas and activities for professional development and what type of rewards are most meaningful. The employee can also weigh in on how performance issues should be addressed.

- **Explain the consequences of the problem.** Clearly outline the issues that the performance concern has caused for the company or the policies they have violated and how others are affected.
- **State the changes required in specific, behavioral terms, with time frames.** Ask the employee for what you want or need. Be specific about the desired behavior. For example, rather than saying “I’d like you to shape up,” say... “We expect you to interact with all customers in an appropriate, business-like manner.” Establish clear time frames in which you expect to see improvement.
- **State the consequences of failing to meet the expectation or outcomes.** Clearly explain your company’s progressive disciplinary process. Take the time to ensure that your employee understands their current status and potential next steps. State the consequences in the same tone as the problem – calmly and without emotion. Express your confidence in the employee’s ability to meet these expectations.

## What do I do after the employee performance discussion?

- Contact Human Resources to discuss the outcome of the meeting.
- Document your action plan, the employee’s verbal response and the next steps. Send the employee a copy of this documentation.
- Continue to document any substandard work performance. Consider making a management referral to the EAP at any step in this process.
- Document any improved work performance. Give your employee feedback.