

Coaching Employees

Disciplining an employee who has engaged in improper conduct should be different from dealing with an employee who is not performing work duties well. In fact, most business people prefer to refer to the latter as coaching, rather than discipline.

In a situation where there are performance problems, employees may not be willfully doing something that violates your policies and may just need some guidance. Some performance problems may even be the result of morale problems.

Effective coaching and giving constructive feedback can be difficult and challenging, but have their advantages:

- Employees learn more about their jobs and perform better.
- Employees develop a sense of loyalty toward you and the business.
- Working conditions are improved.
- Productivity is enhanced and maximized.

The characteristics of a good coach are that he or she is:

- confident in the abilities of individuals
- enthusiastic
- caring
- supportive
- goal-oriented
- knowledgeable
- a good communicator
- patient
- responsive
- an excellent listener

The coaching process has certain perspectives and behaviors that can be duplicated in the workplace. They are:

- **Mutual respect.** Both you and your employees must accept the mutual dependence each has on the other in order for each of you to succeed. From that relationship, respect can grow based on the contributions of each party.
- **Supportive environment.** Where there is respect, it follows that the working environment will be supportive. The opposite is true where there is distrust or conflict.
- **Trust.** Where there is fear, there can be no trust. The workplace must encourage an atmosphere of trust, which includes candor and an acceptance of an initial level of failure.

In order to counsel employees, you must focus your attention on the goals that you are trying to get the employee to achieve. Those goals may be to increase profits, increase

market share, create new products, reduce error rates, or achieve other business-related objectives. In order for employees to know *how* their work can contribute to the goal, they must be taught:

- what the goal is
- how it is achieved
- what part their work plays in reaching the goal

As the coach, you must:

- set clear expectations
- set performance standards
- measure performance
- correct deviations from performance standards
- make it clear that you are on the same side as the employee
- provide guidance while preserving the employee's self-esteem

Steps in Coaching an Employee

Once you've mastered the mindset of the coach, you're ready to try the exercise of coaching an employee with a performance problem. A coaching session to improve poor performance might contain the following steps:

- Express the performance standards for the job and review past performance of the employee. Explain why it is important to the business for the employee to perform well.
- Describe the areas of performance that the employee must improve. As much as possible, describe desired performance in terms of results that are to be achieved. Explain what happens to the department or the company when the employee does not perform well. Describe what good performance looks like, providing concrete examples of good work, if possible. The process of constructive feedback is helpful here.
- Ask for the person's view on why performance does not meet standards. Does the employee believe there is a problem?
- Discuss possible solutions. What does the person propose to do to solve the problem? Have the employee develop steps to solve the problem to create a sense of ownership in the solution. Suspend the session if the employee needs more time to develop a plan. If the employee cannot develop a plan, develop one for the employee.
- Agree to a written action plan containing specific goals and timetables for meeting those goals.
- Have the employee orally commit to the action plan and provide the employee with a copy of the plan. Retain another copy as documentation of the meeting.
- Follow up on performance based on the goals stated in the action plan. Provide feedback on how the employee is doing. Offer suggestions to improve performance. Praise instances where performance has improved.

Coaching to improve poor performance is often the first step of the progressive discipline process. If the employee does not improve performance, however, explain that you may be required to take more severe discipline steps.

Constructive Feedback

Most coaching and counseling methods call for techniques to give and receive information. One of the most effective techniques is called "constructive feedback."

What is constructive feedback? It is a face-to-face conversation with an employee about something that he or she has not done well. You need to get the facts and then you can provide direction to resolve the problem.

What is required to give successful constructive feedback? Giving successful feedback requires that you:

- have explicit, clear expectations of what should occur
- know exactly what behavior and performance occurred and what must be done to resolve or improve the situation
- have honest, candid, and direct face-to-face communication
- know why the business requires a change in behavior
- know how you will monitor the work situation to ensure that the behavior change occurs

How do you plan for it? Here's a checklist to help you plan for giving constructive feedback:

- Do your homework - have personal knowledge of the reason to have the conversation. Allegations and rumors are not enough. Research until you have personally verified what the facts are and that you feel that action is necessary.
- Know the person you will be speaking with well enough to predict what his or her responses will be.
- Practice what you are going to say and in what sequence.
- Know your own communication style, how you are perceived, and how you will react in the event of a challenge or emotional outburst.
- Pick the location and ensure privacy.
- Only in a true emergency should you act without thorough planning.

Because planning is so important, you'll want to have some notes with you when you give an employee constructive feedback. We've prepared a 10-step dialog for you in the *Business Tools* area to follow when you're face-to-face with the employee

Pitfalls of Constructive Feedback

There are some things that can stand in the way of effective feedback. Some employment atmospheres are not open, and lack of candor inhibits true communication, especially

about difficult issues. Remember, too, that criticism hurts. Avoid these pitfalls to make your constructive feedback most effective:

- **Procrastination makes the situation worse.** Behavior in the workplace does not often change and a problem usually gets worse. Waiting until a situation is desperate is unfair, wasteful, and counterproductive.
- **Conversation may seem artificial.** Initially it may seem artificial to follow a script. However, failure to act has more dangerous consequences than the perception that it is difficult to give constructive feedback. Try to be as conversational and natural as possible, but don't make it your primary focus - you're there to change behavior.
- **Timing the conversation is tricky.** Constant, regular communication is the ideal, and it is true that immediate feedback is most effective. But do not initiate any conversation if your own emotional state affects your objectivity or knowledge of the situation. Since the purpose of the conversation is to change behavior, both parties must be receptive. Avoid feedback conversations when it is particularly busy, if privacy cannot be guaranteed, when either party is tired or upset, or if it's too late for the conversation to have a meaningful impact.
- **Criticism seems personal and mean-spirited.** Attacking the individual is beyond the scope of a business conversation. Besides that, it almost guarantees that the desired behavior change will not occur permanently and leaves you open to legitimate criticism. Still, you must address problems caused by someone's performance. Never criticize the individual, but rather *focus on the actual behavior*.
- **Anger and defensive behavior are unpleasant, especially when directed at you.** When challenged, the best strategy is respectful and active listening. Let the other person vent. As difficult as it may be to have employees verbally attack you, the process of getting it off their chest may actually help them be less resistant to change and, by listening carefully, you may learn something that you need to know.
- **Failing to ask the right questions can be costly.** For the constructive feedback to be effective, it must be comprehensive. You must probe to get all of the facts and the perceptions. Plan ahead to ensure that you cover all of the issues. Having a list in front of you will help especially if you are sidetracked by the conversation that occurs.
- **Having hidden agendas is destructive.** Honest and open dialogue does not allow for either party to play games or use the situation to further another purpose.
- **Taking things too personally and losing your objectivity can be harmful.** You may feel personally betrayed. If you experience this type of emotion, it's best to resolve those issues first before confronting the other party about work-related issues.
- **Avoiding your personal opinion is a good idea.** These conversations must be business-based to be appropriate.
- **Trying to do too much in one meeting is not a good idea.** Focus on one issue at a time. Addressing many concerns may overwhelm the employee and may be too much to adequately address and resolve in one conversation.

- **Failing to plan and rehearse can be costly.** You can practice and learn to give feedback well. You must practice to improve your skill level until the complex process of putting together all of this material becomes second nature.

Failing to document the conversation and your actions is not a good idea. Since there is always the possibility that the conversation may be misconstrued or may form the basis for disciplinary action at a point in the future, you must document that it occurred. Additionally, the documentation makes it easier to follow up in an organized manner.