

## **Discussing Performance Concerns With Your Staff**

When you are faced with a situation in which it appears that a staff member has not been meeting your expectations, and that reasonable performance standards are not being met by them, then you need to raise your concerns immediately with your employee. However, the way in which you prepare for and manage such a discussion will determine whether the exchange proves to be either constructive or destructive to the on-going working relationship between the two of you. The following article offers some suggestions about how to approach such a discussion .....

### **It's O.K To Feel Nervous**

If you are new to a management role, then it is likely that the thought of such a discussion will create some apprehension for you (indeed, some degree of anxiety may be experienced even by those who are not so new to the management role).

Not many of us enjoy the prospect of "confrontation" and that is why so many managers often procrastinate with – to the point of avoiding - these types of performance discussions. They have the mistaken belief that the discussion will necessarily become heated, fearing the employee will become argumentative, damaging the working relationship and creating on-going ill-will.

If you find yourself hesitating about whether or not to raise a performance issue with your employee, try asking yourself the following types of questions .....

- i. Will the situation likely get easier or harder to deal with, if it continues?
- ii. What are the effects upon the work performance and attitude of others, if this employee is not meeting the standards required?
- iii. What are the risks to the respect which others may have for you as a leader, if they recognise that you are not addressing the performance issue?

### **It Doesn't Need To Be A Confrontation**

These performance discussions do not need to become a contest of wills, but rather they can be conducted as a natural conversation in which you raise your concern, and establish how your employee views the situation. Ultimately, you are aiming for the discussion to be a collaborative one, where together you can find an outcome that will be of benefit to the both of you.

## **Approaching The Discussion With Some Method**

### **Step 1 : Describe Your Concern**

Unless it's a crisis, sometimes it's best to first give the person a chance to raise the problem themselves, before you raise it. Maybe asking them how things are going, or some other general question. Half the battle in these types of discussions can often be gaining the person's agreement that something is not as it should be.

However, if your staff member doesn't raise the issue, then you will need to raise your concern by describing the specific way in which it appears the person is not performing to the standard required.

In this opening stage of the meeting, remember that you do not want to be perceived as making any accusations, but rather your whole tone is one of neutrality. Help the person recognise the potential impact of the issue if it is not addressed by the two of you.

## **Step 2 : Ask For An Explanation .....**

Make sure you give the employee a genuine opportunity to explain the situation and the surrounding circumstances. Use open-ended questions such as "What do you think is the problem?" ..... "What kept you from getting the report in on time?" .... "Why did this happen?"

Make a list of open-ended questions you could ask your staff member during your preparation, in an attempt to uncover any underlying problems or extenuating circumstances.

You need to maintain an open mind in this stage of the discussion, to the possibility that the cause of the performance problems could well have been beyond the control of the employee. There could have been contributing factors for example such as inadequate training, poor tools, lack of co0peration from others, misunderstanding about what was required.....

## **Step 3 : Together, Explore Options To Improve.**

If the performance problem has existed for a while, your employee may not readily identify how to improve the situation. Whilst it may be very tempting to just "lay down the law" and tell the employee what he or she should do, in the long run it will be more effective if the employee can be guided to finding a solution for themselves – one to which they are committed.

Once again, use good questioning techniques to encourage the employee to state what s/he could do to solve the problem. To the employee who is failing to submit reports on time, you might ask, "What do you think you might do to make sure you get your work in on time?" By the same token, you may want to ask what you can do to help.

The employee may offer a solution you had not considered. Sometimes however, you may need to offer suggestions to help move things forward. But be careful to avoid dominating the discussion if you want to get the employee's commitment to an improvement plan.

## **Step 4 : Agree An Action Plan.**

In this step, the employee commits to improving performance by translating previously identified possible solutions to the problem into a firm action plan.

The two of you should ensure that the action plan refers to goals that are specific, realistic, attainable, simple and time-bound, as well as comprising any necessary strategies for overcoming barriers to reach these goals. Ask your employee to summarise clearly the action plan that has been developed and check if they feel confident that it will indeed solve the problem under discussion.

Make sure that you agree a time when you will both come back together to review whether the action plan is delivering the desired improvement – and if necessary, together make any further adjustments to the plan that may be required.

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