

Managers: Mastering that Conversation you're Trying to Avoid

By Sharone Bar-David, LLB MSW

Behind every termination of an employee based on poor performance, you will usually find a manager who dropped the ball. It's easy enough to say that the employee didn't perform, but the truth is that the manager's own actions are often just as much to blame. Specifically, managers tend to fall short during two critical junctures: they don't address the problem in its earlier stages and, when they finally do, they mishandle the actual process. As a result, employees who could possibly have bounced back to acceptable performance become the unwitting casualties of managers who are not practicing responsible management.

Trap No. 1: Avoidance

It is all too common for an employee's performance to deteriorate for months or even years without any managerial intervention. Paradoxically, a root cause for this inaction lies in the manager's sense of personal identity. Managers are human beings who want to think of themselves as kind and decent creatures. In their mind, addressing lagging performance heads-on gets translated into: "If I can do this to a fellow human being, it must mean that I'm a bad person". This thought is intolerable to most, so they revert to avoidance and procrastination. They ignore changes in the employee's performance while telling themselves that 'it will pass' or that 'it isn't really all that serious'. Or they persuade themselves that they have more pressing priorities. In these situations, the manager's sense of inner decency and unwillingness to inflict hardship may lead to evasion.

Meanwhile, things on the ground get worse. Rather than helping the employee, the manager's procrastination exacerbates the situation.

Trap No. 2: Botching the Conversation

Once a manager decides to address matters heads on, the next hurdle is the need to hold a discussion with the employee. It's a tough conversation to have and one of the most hazardous mistakes one can make is to ignore the fact that the conversation is inevitably going to involve feelings. Not only the employee's feelings but also those of the manager. In fact, a surprising number of managers report high levels of stress and anxiety before and during such conversations. The experience triggers the built-in Fight-or-Flight Stress Response, which involves a gush of adrenaline and cortisol into the body. This in turn compromises the manager's performance during the conversation.

On the employee side, it's only natural to experience a strong emotional response when called into the manager's office to discuss performance problems. The employee's Fight-or-Flight Response gets activated too. Indeed, the manager needs to expect and prepare for the employee to respond with any of the following emotionally loaded responses: silence, crying, anger, attacking, blaming, defensiveness, bitterness or denial. And if the manager is not aware of his or her own emotional state, their ability to deal with the employee's reactions affectively will diminish. The process can then get terminally derailed.

Mastering the Conversation

Much of managers' avoidance and anxiety stems from having no solid framework to rely on during the conversation. A good training program can offer managers tools for handling this process competently and confidently. For example, the following six-step method helps navigate the conversation in a supportive, firm and fair fashion. Using this type of approach can help turn things around completely.

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Step 1: Reference to good past performance. Begin the meeting by expressing appreciation for good past performance. Letting the employee know that their positive history will be factored into this discussion will reduce anxiety. Don't exaggerate the positive – be realistic. Keep it brief, as the person will likely know that 'bad news' is coming.

Step 2: Relay observations. Describe the specifics of the performance problems. Focus on concrete observations and refrain from unqualified diagnosis. Describe the behaviours in terms that a video camera would capture. Don't say "you've been defensive". Instead, say "when Mary inquired about a late report, you yelled at her". After all, if you use diagnostic judgements and tell George that he had been "aggressive and uncooperative" you can pretty much bet that he will become aggressive and uncooperative before your very eyes, and rightfully so. Using 'video camera language', you'd say, "Over the past 6 weeks, four of your reports were missing critical data. As well, on two occasions you told co-workers who asked for your assistance that if they can't do their job properly they should go find another one".

Step 3: Review expectations. Refer to the expected standards of conduct so that the employee is clear about the specific ways in which the performance falls short of what is required. For example, "The expectation within our organization is that employees demonstrate respect toward customers, even when provoked."

Step 4: Express concern. Now that you have outlined the problems, express your concern for the employee's well being and future. A short "I'm concerned about you and want to make sure that together we can get things back on track" will go a long way.

Step 5: Open a dialogue. Up to this point it was you who did all the talking. Now it's time to get a sense of the employee's perspective through meaningful dialogue that will enable you to arrive at a workable plan for action. During this step you can expect the range of emotional reactions discussed above. Keep your own reactions in check and remain supportive. A keen listening ear and a non-judgmental attitude are excellent tools at this stage.

Step 6: Action Plan. Based on the information gleaned in the dialogue, it's time to find workable solutions. You'll need to set crystal clear expectations, arrive at a mutually understood plan, define precise accountabilities for the employee and the manager, decipher methods and deadlines for monitoring progress, and spell out the consequences if performance does not improve. It's important to set a date for the next meeting and to convey that you are confident in the person's ability to improve.



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