

The Four Step Approach Helping the Troubled Employee



The **FOUR-STEP APPROACH** has proven to be very successful in helping employees with job performance problems return to a normal level of job function. The approach is based on the premise that personal and other problems can have a negative impact on job performance. Effective supervisory confrontation of performance decline together with assistance for personal problems through the EAP can help an employee re-establish job functioning and general well-being. Supervisors are the key to the success of this approach because they are in a unique position to observe changes in employee behavior on the job. Early detection of performance decline and early intervention in personal problems increases the possibility for successful counseling and a return to normal levels of performance.

Supervisors control the most powerful tool in motivating employees to get the help they may need – they control their jobs. Employees with problems often ignore or rationalize the efforts of family or friends, but it is difficult to ignore or rationalize the concerns of a supervisor or the possibility of losing one's job. Through early detection and effective motivation, employees, supervisors, and department all benefit.

1 Observe employee job performance

Watch for changes in job behavior and performance. Watch for patterns of deterioration rather than isolated incidents (we all have bad days).

Recognize that a decline in job performance may be an indication of personal problems. It is important to remember that an employee's personal problems are a matter of supervisory concern only to the extent that they affect job performance. Job performance deficiencies caused by personal problems need to be differentiated from other reasons for poor performance, including unclear job expectations, skill deficiencies, inadequate supervision, and other workplace obstacles. Establish clear job performance expectations for the employee. If you suspect a decline in job performance proceed to the next step.

2 Document specific incidents of deficient job performance over a period of time

Documentation should be in writing and include specific dates, times, places, events and action taken. Good documentation will establish any patterns that exist and will protect you from possible grievance actions. If you recognize a pattern of job performance decline based on your documentation consult with the EAP. The EAP can provide expert consultation and support to supervisors faced with a troubled employee, add a sense of objectivity to the situation, and coach the supervisor on how to proceed. Supervisors should not handle these difficult situations on their own. With the help of the EAP, proceed to the next step.

3 Confront employee regarding documented instances of declining job performance

(see Constructive Confrontation)

Assure the employee that he or she is important to you and valuable to your operation. Underscore that you are concerned with performance; don't get sidetracked by explanations or excuses; don't attempt to diagnose or counsel employees. Set down in writing a contract for improvement with behaviorally defined goals and a specified time frame. You may proceed to the next step at this time, particularly if there has been a serious decline in performance, or you may wait until the end of the agreed time frame to determine level of improvement.

4 Refer the employee to The Solutions Group EAP

To make a Formal Supervisor Referral call 1-855-231-7737.

Again, base your referral on a pattern of job performance decline. Emphasize the confidential nature of the EAP and the fact that the EAP is an employee benefit designed to assist with personal and other problems. Express concern, but do not counsel the employee yourself. Note that an EAP referral is strictly voluntary, but that job performance must improve. Encourage the employee to call the EAP during your discussion to schedule an appointment with a counselor. The counselor will explore whatever personal problems may be affecting job performance and will work with the employee to address them. Emphasize that the employee needs to follow through on any EAP recommendation(s). Acknowledge that you will be informed as to whether the employee kept the EAP appointment. If the employee signs a Release of Information the supervisor will also be informed if a follow-up recommendation was made, and if the employee followed through with the recommendation(s).



Constructive Confrontation



Crucial Aspect

The most crucial aspect of the four-step approach is the supervisor's confrontation with an employee whose job performance is deficient. It is extremely important that the supervisor not make any attempt to diagnose the cause of the employee's job performance problem or attempt to counsel the employee. This may divert attention from the job performance issues you wish to address. If the supervisor follows the established procedures for documenting performance deficiencies, the initial discussion with the employee will be based on objective performance data rather than vague references to the employee's unsatisfactory work. The goal of the discussion is motivation, not punishment. The supervisor should not avoid this confrontation when the employee's job performance indicates that such a confrontation is in order. Dealing with performance problems is a part of the supervisor's job; it is in the best interest of the employee, the supervisor, and the organization.

A. Preparation

- 1. Review your documentation of job behavior and performance deficiencies.**
Be clear in your own mind about what must improve so you can convey your expectations to the employee. Make notes so you are sure to cover all your points. Have your documentation and notes in hand when you meet with the employee.
- 2. Be aware of your own feelings about the employee, the situation, and the confrontation.**
Anger, frustration, resentment, guilt, discomfort are all a normal part of the process. Acknowledging your feelings to yourself will keep them from interfering with the confrontation process.
- 3. Select a place and time for the discussion, which afford privacy.**
No one enjoys criticism, however appropriate; but criticism in the presence of co-workers can cause more difficulties than it resolves.
- 4. Call the EAP. Review your approach with an EAP counselor.**
Talk about whatever discomforts you might feel in anticipation of the confrontation.

B. The Discussion

- 1. Express care and concern, but don't attempt to "counsel" the employee.**
Communicate that you value the employee as a person as well as a worker.
- 2. Be firm and honest.**
Don't hedge. Using your documentation outline, tell the employee exactly what it is that dissatisfies you with his/her performance. Present specific job performance data.
- 3. Note the employee's pattern of change from previous performance levels (if applicable).**
- 4. Don't be an "Armchair Diagnostician."**
Attempting to label the employee's problem is not your responsibility. Your concern is only with correcting deficient performance.
- 5. Allow the employee to respond without interruption.**
You may or may not choose to reply to the specifics of the employee's response, depending upon the legitimacy of the issues raised. It is important that you not get sidetracked with excuses or rationalizations. Keep the focus on performance and the need for the employee to take responsibility for improvement.
- 6. Don't let the employee play you against upper management, the union, or another employee.**
If the employee is a member of a union, make sure a union representative is aware of the discussion.
- 7. If the employee blames his/her poor performance on personal problems, take the opportunity to refer the employee to the EAP.**

8. Establish an improvement plan that outlines job performance expectations.
State in measurable terms, if possible, what the employee must do to reach and maintain an acceptable standard of performance. Identify the time frame in which the employee must improve his/her performance.
9. State the specific job consequences if performance does not improve within the given period of time.
Refer to the agency's policies on progressive discipline. This will help the employee understand exactly where he/she stands with the agency and will communicate the seriousness with which you take this matter.
10. Set up a schedule of follow-up meetings with the employee to evaluate and review progress.
This will keep both of you committed to following through on your concerns and prevents this from becoming a "one-shot deal". Document the meetings and your findings and, if possible, what the employee must do to reach and maintain an acceptable standard of performance. Identify the time frame in which the employee must improve his/her performance.

EAP and Progressive Discipline

The four-step approach may be used prior to the initiation of progressive discipline or in conjunction with disciplinary action. If progressive discipline becomes necessary, it is important to refer the employee to the EAP at each stage of discipline and document that you have done so. In this way, you are demonstrating good faith in offering the employee ample opportunity to receive help. This also protects you in the event of a grievance for any subsequent job action.

The Back to Work Conference

Occasionally, an employee needs inpatient treatment or must take time off from work for other personal reasons. Returning to work can be difficult and awkward, yet the EAP can assist in this transition by arranging a "Back to Work Conference" with the employee and supervisor. The purpose of the conference is to support and encourage the employee's efforts to get help, review the prior work record, and implement a plan for successful return to work.

Confidentiality

The Employee Assistance Program has always regarded client records, including medical and personnel records, as confidential and available only to the employee and employee authorized individuals. Preserving the confidential nature of these records is essential to the overall success of the program. Since one of the goals of the program is to encourage employees who suspect they may be developing personal problems to refer themselves for treatment, it is necessary to create an atmosphere in which they feel free to initiate such self-referral. It would be impossible to create such an atmosphere if it were not commonly understood that all records pertaining to the self-referral or the supervisor referral would be strictly confidential.

A Final Note

Take the responsibility to intervene. Don't be afraid to interfere or get involved. You have a legitimate right to interfere when an employee's overall job performance is below standard. It is highly probable that an employee's performance will improve if the employee is confronted constructively and consistently. On the other hand if he/she is ignored or warned in an inconsistent and arbitrary manner, it is highly unlikely that the employee's performance will improve.

Intervening with a troubled employee is a courageous act. Even if the employee chooses not to get help at this time, you have begun the process of helping the employee take responsibility for his/her job performance and related actions. In this sense, there are no "failures." If nothing else, you can feel a sense of relief in that you have not avoided the problem-you have done everything possible to help a troubled employee get help and return to his/her full potential on the job. The rest is up to the employee. This is not a mandatory approach, but its usefulness is self-evident. It is a vehicle to ensure productivity and to salvage valuable employee.

If you have questions about Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and how it can help you in a specific situation, please call us at:
1-855-231-7737.