

Ignoring Poor Performance

Ignore Poor Performance at your own peril.

Most workers endeavor to work hard, and their performance usually is observed to be good or exceptional. However, at times supervisors are faced with employees whose performance has become unacceptable. This can be the toughest part of your job. As many managers have said, "My biggest problems are people problems." Ignoring poor performance is not the way to handle people problems.

At the outset of performance deterioration, start documenting when a trend has begun. Isolated occurrences can be set aside. But, ignoring a pattern of poor performance sends a negative message to others, that poor performance can be ignored for some individuals. In addition, it tends to get worse with time. Taking action does not hurt morale; it improves it. Constructive counseling given early and regularly not only leads to improvements but also eliminates more formal actions that can become unpleasant. The key word is early, early communication, early feedback, and if necessary, early termination after a probationary period. Investing time early is always time well spent.

At this juncture, if the employee is inherited to you or if you are new to the department, a study of his background qualifications [education, training, and experience] and the related job description is timely. Is there a match or is this a misplaced individual? This is common to small to medium size companies.

A portion of every work force is experiencing personal problems at any one time, and this can appear at any level. Troubled employees may suffer from anxiety, depression, confusion, low self-esteem, and fear. This affects not only their personal lives but their jobs and performance. These personal problems run the gamut from couple relationships, emotional problems, finances, alcohol/drugs, stress/life crises, grief, and domestic violence. The employee may be in a precarious position affecting personal safety or safety in the work place.

Observe, Document, and Inform - The opening conference with the employee will reveal your concerns in specific behavioral terms, focusing on specific areas, and discussing time frames for improvement. The framework of this activity is observe, document, and inform. Observe what's going on, write it down in terms of actions, time, place, and date, and inform the employee in privacy. Allow no interruptions. HR should be informed if disciplinary action is planned.

1. Observe – Make note of inconsistent productivity, variation in quality of work, poor attendance or absences, frequent lateness, excessive sick leave, neglect of assignments and deadlines, irritability, placing blame with others, avoidance of co-workers and principals. Single incidents do not typically warrant concern. A pattern of deteriorating or poor performance, however, indicates a need for intervention. Catch problems as early as possible.

2. Document – A record of related events assists the supervisor in recognizing when a problem has become enough of an issue to invite confrontation. A detailed accounting of events and settings will provide accurate feedback about his poor performance. Start documenting at the outset, and record observable, measurable facts. Write down the specifics, exact times, dates, place, and nature of the incidents, and names of other persons involved. Documentation clarifies the situation for you and for the records. It helps you communicate specifics to the employee, and it facilitates discussion. In addition, legal protection is implicit in the record, which may come into play during grievance or arbitration. Keep this record confidential.

Document any decline in performance or a pattern of poor performance, missed deadlines, inability to cooperate with others, and frequent accidents. Record attendance breaches such as absenteeism, questionable excuses, tardiness, abuses of breaks and lunch times. And note poor interpersonal skills in dealing with you, colleagues, and customers.

3. Inform – Productivity and job performance are your main concerns. When faced with performance problems, your challenge is to seek performance improvements and to remain objective. When preparing for the conference, consult with HR, if necessary, and be familiar with personnel policies and disciplinary procedures. Meet with the employee as soon as a pattern has been established. Provide privacy. Plan in advance the structure and goals of the meeting. Focus on poor performance and behavior, not the person or personal problems, even though they may have an important bearing on events. Summarize the discussion and plan a follow-up on improvement and progress at regular intervals. Use your documentation to structure your feedback to the employee.

During the discussion, focus on declining job performance and the offer to help. Have your documentation on hand, so you can ‘let the record speak for itself.’ Maintain a firm yet considerate attitude. Casual conversation will lessen the impact. If the employee denies having a problem, review the documentation citing specifics. Stick to work performance. Indicate your belief that personal problems could have had an impact on performance. But, do not enter discussion on personal problems. Inform the employee of the importance of improving the poor performance and the consequences of not improving.

Following the discussion – Document the interactions during the conference. Likewise, do the same at succeeding conferences. Notify your manager and HR of your discussion. Confronting an employee with poor work performance can be an uncomfortable task, and when the person is a personal friend, it is especially difficult. But ignoring the poor performance situation does not help the employee. Because your role is monitoring job performance, you are in a key position to see an employee’s behavioral patterns and changes. Your confrontation can be a strong motivator to the person to face his problems and understanding the necessity of changing. A responsible supervisor can be the best help a troubled employee has.

An employee may not be able or willing to bring poor performance up to par. Success cannot be guaranteed, no matter how much goodwill and effort go into an employee’s improvement. But, if you follow these steps, you will know that you have given your employee the best chance of success.