

Coaching for Performance Improvement

The following steps can be very effective in helping an employee improve performance. These steps are designed to help a sub-performing employee meet performance expectations.

Prior to conducting a coaching session, take time to outline key points you want to discuss with the employee for each step in this coaching framework. Using this framework will help the coach stay focused, cover key topics of discussion, and be more confident and relaxed in the process. Wherever possible, engage the employee in the process.

1. **Describe the Performance Issue:** The focus this step is to describe the performance issue in behavioral terms. This can be a collaborative step. What behavior is the employee demonstrating that is problematic? Is the employee late for work or team meetings? Are assignments turned in late? Is the employee demeaning to co-workers? Whatever the inappropriate behavior may be, be specific. Avoid general comments such as “bad attitude.” Provide the employee the opportunity to share his/her perspective about performance and things that may be causing or contributing to the performance issue. Listen carefully to what the employee says. Use open-ended questions to enhance your understanding of the employee’s perspective. This can also help clarify performance aspects for the employee.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask the employee.

- a. Given the incident that occurred, how would you describe your behavior?
 - b. Is this behavior that is acceptable in our organization?
 - c. What would your reaction be to this behavior if it were somehow broadcast to others in the organization?
 - d. How would you feel if others in the organization behaved in this manner?
2. **Explore the Impact:** Often, employees do not understand how their behavior impacts others, including you as a manager. They may understand part of the impact, but often miss the broader impacts. The purpose of this step is to ensure the employee has an understanding of how sub-performance impacts the team, work unit, organization, customers, themselves and you. You may have to give specific examples of how his/her behavior impacts others, if they fail to make the connection.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask the employee.

- a. Who does this behavior impact?
- b. What impact does this behavior have on others?
- c. What impact does this behavior have on your co-workers?

- d. What impact does this behavior have on me as your manager?
- e. What impact does this behavior have on our customers?

3. **Clarify Expectations:** At the end of this session, it is important for the employee to clearly understand what is expected of them. If there are relevant policies in place, provide the employee with a copy of the policy. What behaviors should be exhibited by the employee in order to meet an acceptable level of performance? In some cases, the employee may not be sure what behavior you do want. In this step, we want to ensure the employee understands the specific type of performance/behavior you want to see. Involve the employee in the problem solving process. What steps does he/she think could be taken to improve performance? Ask for feedback to ensure that the employee understands what you want. Clarify as appropriate. At some point in the coaching process, you may need to specifically state what behavior you want from them.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask the employee.

- a. What company policy addresses this type of behavior?
- b. What behavior is expected of you?
- c. What behavior do you think I expect of you?
- d. Can you summarize what the behavioral expectations we have discussed?
- e. What questions do you have now that you have reviewed relevant company policy?

4. **Be Clear about Possible Consequences – Positive and Corrective:** The focus of this step is to help the employee understand potential outcomes of their behavior, positive and constructive/negative. What are the potential outcomes of meeting performance expectations? Is there some type of positive reward if the employee changes his/her behavior? For example, if performance meets standards, can you recommend the individual for a special opportunity or extra training?

What are the consequences for continued poor performance? Could the employee be subject to formal discipline or termination? The employee needs to understand the potential outcomes of failing to meet performance expectations.

Express your desire to see the employee be successful in meeting performance expectations. Explain that though you hope not to take more severe action, you will take appropriate action if performance does not improve. If appropriate, require the employee to inform you if issues arise that may impact his/her performance.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask the employee.

- a. If this behavior continues, what are possible outcomes?

- b. If this behavior improves, what are possible outcomes?
- c. What outcome would you like to see?
- d. To what extent can I count on you to turn this around?

If the behavior will result in disciplinary action, then the process may be better suited for your organization's Progressive Discipline System.

5. **Engage in Action Planning:** Work with the employee to develop a plan of action. Ask open-ended questions to help him/her explore different options. If the employee is agreeable to you sharing examples, give him/her ideas that have worked for you and/or other employees. This is a joint process between you and the employee. The plan should result in establishing one or more SMART goals: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed.

As the employee is developing the action plan, consider to what extent their ideas will help them reach their goal of improved performance. If you have questions, ask them questions to help them to think through the logic of their ideas and the probability of success. Ask if you can share ideas for them to consider. In some instances, especially where the situation is dangerous or where they are likely to face adverse action, you may need to tell them what specific action is needed.

Ask the employee to write down the goals, and preferably sign and date the document. Writing down goals and signing the document increases the likelihood the employee will follow through.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask the employee.

- a. What steps could you take to correct the behavior?
 - b. Ultimately, what is your goal?
 - c. To what extent are those steps realistic?
 - d. How will you know when you have been successful?
 - e. To what extent will these steps help you reach your goal?
 - f. How will you know if you are making progress?
 - g. Who can help you be successful?
 - h. If you take these steps, how can that benefit you? How could it benefit others?
6. **Commit to Action:** Whatever the goal, the employee will need to identify action steps to help them accomplish the goal. Without taking this step, employees may be at a loss as to where to start.

What are logical steps the employee can take to accomplish the goal? The employee will need time to brainstorm action steps. If they have difficulty with this process, assist them in the brainstorming process. However, present your ideas as options, rather than saying, “You should do...” An exception to this, however, may be where the employee’s performance or behavior must conform to a specific policy or procedure.

What are the timeframes associated with the action steps? Assist the employee in clarifying next steps can help ensure he/she has a clear sense of what needs to be done next or within a certain period of time.

As the coach, what can you do to assist the employee in obtaining his/her goals? Perhaps the employee will need additional training, time, feedback or other assistance that is within your ability to provide. Offering support demonstrates a willingness to help.

This is a good time to clarify expectations and answer questions. Set a date/time to meet again to check on progress.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask the employee.

- a. What is the first step you will take?
 - b. When will you take that step?
 - c. What is the next step after that one?
 - d. What can I do to help you be successful?
 - e. How will you know if you are on track?
 - f. Can I share some examples of what others have done in a similar situation? Rate on a scale of one to ten the degree of certainty you have that you will carry out the actions agreed upon.
 - g. What prevents you from being a ten?
7. **Follow Up:** Following through serves as an accountability loop. If the employee has not taken action, exhibits resistance, or encountered a roadblock, help the employee identify options to get back on track. In some instances, the coach may need to assist or intervene in some way, as appropriate.

An important step in the follow through stage is to document the coaching process. Why is documentation important?

Genuine concern, patience and empathy are important qualities for coaching. However, follow through includes implementing or recommending the consequences discussed above if performance does not improve. Give positive reinforcement wherever possible.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask the employee.

- a. How is it going?
 - b. Are you making progress?
 - c. How do you feel about the progress you are making?
 - d. Where are you relative to the plan of action we agreed upon?
 - e. What obstacles have you encountered?
 - f. What can I do to help?
 - g. Where are we now?
8. **Document:** Take time to document the discussion. This is particularly important when performance is not acceptable and adverse action is a possible outcome. Generally, in order to sustain adverse action the employer will need to demonstrate that the behavior and/or performance was unacceptable, that the employee knew it was unacceptable, the supervisor and/or manager had discussed the performance issues with the employee, the employee was given ample opportunity to address the issue, the employee knew that failure to correct the issue could result in adverse action, and the process was well documented. Consult with your organization's Human Resources Unit to identify specific actions/concerns that should be taken into account in cases where adverse action may occur.

The document would include meeting details such as date, time, location, and who was present. It would also contain specific discussion points for each of the above steps. Include reasons the employee shares for his/her sub-performance and/or behavior, any steps they will take to correct the behavior and other pertinent details. Give the employee a copy of the discussion, save one for your future reference, and follow any organization specific guidelines for such documentation. Include an acknowledgement line for the employee to sign that they have received a copy of the document.

An error many managers make is not taking time to document performance discussions. Too often, supervisors and managers get frustrated and decide to take action, but find that prior interactions with the problem employee have not been documented. In fact, it is not uncommon to find acceptable/positive evaluations and the absence of documented discussions when a decision is made to terminate an employee. This can be confusing to an employee and difficult to defend if litigated.

Performance Coaching Worksheet

1. Describe the Performance Issue:

2. Explore the Impacts:

3. Clarify Expectations:

4. Be Clear about Possible Consequences – Positive and Corrective:

5. Engage in Action Planning:

6. Commit to Action:

7. Follow Up: When will you follow up with the employee?

8. Document – What documentation is necessary considering department protocol?
