Maintaining your role as a manager/ supervisor when problems arise

An employee comes into work slamming doors and grumbling at their co-workers and supervisor. The remainder of the day isn’t much better for this employee; it’s apparent he’s having problems concentrating and his productivity is off. However, this behavior is not typical, so everyone lets it slide.

As the weeks progress, it becomes clear that something is going on in this employee’s life that is affecting his work performance. What started out as one “off day” has turned into a stream of lowered productivity, errors and in general, an employee who is clearly unhappy and projecting that attitude into the workplace.

Of course, we all understand that every day may not be perfect, but what should a manager/supervisor do when behaviors begin to negatively impact the workplace or individual employee performance?

Performance issues may include:
- Absenteeism
- Presenteeism (on the job absenteeism)
- Increased accident rate
- Difficulty concentrating
- Confusion
- Spasmodic work patterns
- Reporting to work in an abnormal condition
- Lowered job efficiency
- Poor employee relations
- Appearance or hygiene issues

Addressing employee issues

As a manager/supervisor it’s important to maintain appropriate boundaries with your staff, especially when addressing performance issues. Included in maintaining these boundaries are the following:
- Do not attempt to “diagnose” the employee
- Do not try to provide counseling to a troubled employee
- Do not over-sympathize to the point where you are excusing poor performance
- Do not “cover for” the employee by doing their work or reassigning duties
- Do not be reluctant to confront an employee regarding performance issues

As a leader, you can offer empathy, but the bottom line is that there are certain job expectations that each employee has to meet; if an employee is struggling to meet those criteria, it is your responsibility as a manager to address the situation.

Document! Document! Document!

The best thing a supervisor can do when they start noticing a performance issue is to begin the documentation process. Even if the issue never progresses to the point where action is needed, should disciplinary action need to be taken, having a documented record is critical. It’s impossible to recreate an accurate record with dates, times and observations after the fact.

Be sure to record:
- What happened?
- When?
- Who was involved?
- What was the outcome?

Accurate documentation prevents a “your word against mine” situation; allows the record to speak for itself; helps you, as the supervisor, recognize a pattern of problem behavior; and increases your confidence in confronting the employee.

The performance improvement plan meeting

Addressing performance issues need not be an adversarial process—after all, as a manager, you want your staff to perform at their best. By addressing issues early and in a professional manner, you provide the employee with valuable information regarding where improvement is needed and how to overcome barriers to success. This conversation not only benefits the employee by allowing them a chance to improve performance and increase their value as an employee, but also provides them with an opportunity to avoid the possibility of more severe disciplinary action.

When meeting with the employee:
- Consider if you need a witness
- Remain calm
- Express appropriate amounts of care and concern
- Be patient
- Expect the employee to defend themselves/their actions
- Be prepared to address employee defenses (Contact Ease@Work for a tip sheet on “Employee Defense Strategies or Traps.”)

As Harold S. Geneen (1910–97), former president of ITT said, “It is an immutable law in business that words are words, explanations are explanations, promises are promises, but only performance is reality.” Let Ease@Work help you and your managers make sense of the words, explanations and promises as related to managing employee performance issues.
**Q:** What can I do about an employee who, when asked, says they’ve finished a project, but in reality, they haven’t completed the work? Everyone who works with this employee doesn’t trust what he/she says.

**A:** If an employee is asked about project and says they’ve finished it, when they really haven’t—that’s lying. Honesty is expected at work; you don’t have to tolerate this behavior. Certainly, the simplest way to keep the employee accountable is to have his/her supervisor schedule follow-up meetings with them employee to review any project’s progress. If the work expected hasn’t been completed, the supervisor should document this as a work performance issue. Once this is documented as recurring, the supervisor should take the appropriate action in regards to implementing the organization’s performance improvement plan.

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**Upcoming events**

**Ease@Work is sponsoring the Akron SHRM meeting** on Wednesday, May 12, 2010. Speakers on the topics of healthcare, labor law updates and worker’s compensation/OSHA are scheduled for the full day conference, which is from 8:30 A.M. – 1:00 P.M. However, attendees may choose to register for only the luncheon session. For more info or to register, go to http://www.akronshrm.org/events.html.

**Advanced notice for the 2010 HR Star Conference… this event will take place on** Wednesday, July 28, 2010 from 9:00 A.M. – 4:30 P.M. at the Holiday Inn-South, 6001 Rockside Road; Independence, Oh 44131. Registration opens in May. Go to http://www.hrstarconference.com/cleveland to register or view scheduled speakers and topics.

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**We know people! EASE@Work is connected to an extensive network of specialists who support the unique needs of Human Resources.**

*If you’re not sure if we can help you with your needs, just ask!*

**Here’s an example of how we can help:**

Confronting an employee can be difficult, especially when unacceptable behaviors are discreet and/or subtle. Unlike an employee who strolls in an hour late or exhibits verbal outbursts, the employee who is guarded, withholds information, or is at work but not actually working (known as “presenteeism”), can be more difficult to address, especially when the employee has a passive/aggressive nature. The supervisor often second-guesses their perception of the situation. Thus, when there is uncertainty about whether or not to engage in a disciplinary discussion, where do you begin?

EASE offers several options for managers, when it comes to dealing with their employees. One popular method to sort out an approach is to call in for a Management Consultation. By explaining what you are sensing in the employee, an EASE Clinical Specialist or Clinical Manager can help you bring clarity to the situation and offer ways to address the employee’s behavior. If necessary, the specialist can walk you through the process of initially addressing the employee, or discuss your company’s process of administering a formal Management Referral. Don’t put off your concern. Begin with a Management Consultation and gain the tools you need to be effective, and respected, by your employees.

**Full one-hour EASE Management & Supervisor Trainings are also available at no charge for larger groups of Managers and Supervisors. Call your Account Manager to inquire.**

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**What have you missed at Interact@Ease?**

*Last month’s topics included:*

- Updates on changes to the Ohio Bureau of Worker’s Compensation Drug Free Workplace program. How will the new Drug Free Safety Program impact your organization?

- Discussions about Workplace Wellness, including how to incorporate a “progressive training method” into wellness challenges for more meaningful impact and continued conversation about healthcare costs associated with employees who still use tobacco products.

- Spring Cleaning Your Emotional House—suggestions and inspiration on looking a life with a refreshed view from one of our expert trainers, Jim Smith, The Executive Happiness Coach.

- Knowing when an elderly loved one needs help and how to offer assistance as an individual or family.

Be sure to visit www.easeatwork.com and click on the “Visit our blog” link for the latest conversations about human resource, EAP and wellness-related topics.