Dealing with employee performance issues

Overview

This learning resource will help you to understand a variety of strategies for following up on employee performance appraisals and addressing both positive and negative performance.

You will also discover the importance of recognising exceptional performance and rewarding it on an ongoing basis, as well as learn what options are available to reward it.

You will explore the role of counselling in the workplace, why it can be an effective tool, what procedures need to be followed and the ethical issues involved. Also, the role of employee assistance programs will be discussed.

Key terms

Intervention
Strategies for correcting or improving group or employee performance.

Feedback on under-achievement and poor performance

All reinforcement actions need to be documented and signed, whether they are rewards or interventions.

Performance interventions emerging from performance feedback can range from a warning to a dismissal.
Unsatisfactory work performance means that the job incumbent is ineffective in achieving work goals and objectives. Non-compliant performance means that a person is failing to adhere to the required standards of the job. Misconduct is unsatisfactory wilful conduct on behalf on an employee, which is in opposition to rules and codes of conduct that apply to the job.

A well-designed performance management system reduces the need for dealing with poor performance. The reason for this is that the poor performance of employees can be identified and addressed informally, as it occurs in the workplace by team leaders and line managers. Even at this stage, there are a number of conditions that need to be upheld.

Informal counselling between a team member and team leader needs to:

- give the team member reasonable notice that counselling is to occur
- restrict the counselling session to the work performance of the team member
- identify specific deficits (gaps) in work performance
- allow the team member opportunities to respond to the performance deficit (gap) that has been identified
- reach a documented agreement that work performance will improve

There are times when this is action may be ineffective for a number of reasons. There may be:

- different perceptions of the problem
- different beliefs or understandings of how things should be done
- disagreement on what actually happened
- disregard for extraneous factors
- personal differences.

If an agreement to rectify poor performance cannot be reached at this level, then further interventionary action needs to take place at another level of management. If failure to resolve the problem results in deadlock, conflict or dispute, the team member needs to be informed of the grievance and dispute resolution procedures.

There are many underlying reasons for poor work performance. They include the following and more:

- lack of communication
- interpersonal conflict
- job mismatch
- role confusion
- lack of skills
- ineffective management
- unsuitable organisational culture
- inappropriate organisational structure
- too much change
- poor work ethic
- stress
- insufficient pay
- overwork
- harsh or unsafe working condition
- unclear objectives
- absence of standards
- intimidation
- lack of support
- insecure tenure

When an informal warning or counselling fails, then there may be a need to diagnose the employee’s underlying problem. This is part of the formal counselling session.

Formal counselling of poor performance may also proceed without informal counselling, when the problem is going to be beyond the ability or scope of the team leader to manage. Formal performance counselling to address performance gaps can also take place at the end of a probationary period, or during the annual cycle of organisational performance review.

As the warnings are repeated, they take on a form of disciplinary action. As disciplinary action is converted into remedial activities, and failure to respond leads to termination of employment, all must be well documented. This is to ensure a fair, valid and reliable process, and to comply with
legislation and industrial relations regulations that ensure this process takes place.

Performance intervention

Opportunities must be allowed to develop plans for individual performance improvement and development at any time during the performance feedback process, when it comes to the point of identifying performance intervention.

There are number of ways that improvement and development can be initiated as interventionary action. One is performance counselling as an ongoing review and feedback process. This encompasses a view to progress towards a problem-solving process, which identifies learning and development strategies.

Counselling needs to be undertaken by a skilled professional. The counsellor will work to bring the employee to a point where they are able to diagnose their own performance problem. From there, the two will work together through a problem-solving process to a point where the employee is able to set goals to restore an acceptable level of performance.

Counselling takes time, sometimes weeks or months, particularly when the unacceptable level of work performance requires considerable behavioural and attitudinal change.

Employee Assistance Programs based on professional counselling can also be used to resolve personal and interpersonal issues that are impacting on the performance and productivity of employees.

There are ethical issues to be considered with performance counselling, whether it is conducted by internal staff or by outside specialists. Counselling must be a planned and purposeful activity aimed specifically at rectifying an unacceptable explicit standard of performance.

Counselling, which often entails an extended process over time, must be a private and confidential undertaking. Also, in view of the sensitive nature of performance counselling, linked to personal behaviour, values, beliefs and attitudes, it is imperative that the privacy and confidentiality of personnel records are maintained.

Specialised and intensive work, such as employee assistance programs, positive reinforcement systems, intensive remedial counselling and behaviour modification, needs to be undertaken by professional counsellors or therapists.

Another form of intervention is specific skills training. It has the purpose of rectifying and/or improving performance, either by formal training, and/or through coaching and behaviour modelling through mentoring.
Try it

Identify actions for intervening in cases of under-performance, sub-standard performance and non-compliant performance.

Research a number of organisations to identify the range of interventions and actions for addressing poor performance. Explain each one below:

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Try it

Identify actions for intervening in cases of under-performance, sub-standard performance and non-compliant performance.

An employee with previously above average performance, excellent attendance and good application to their duties has changed markedly over the last three months. While still attending, their performance is falling notably behind target, their manner is uncommunicative and when approached, they do not offer clues to the source of the change.
What strategies could you use to determine your course of action and what options might be appropriate depending on the underlying scenario. What restraints are there upon an employer in a situation like this?

**Exceptional performance**

It is far more difficult to manage unacceptable levels of performance than it is to manage high levels of work performance. Yet, exceptional performance is less likely to receive the attention that poor performance does. It tends, instead, to be taken for granted. When an organisation is striving to achieve exceptional results, recognition must be afforded to those employees who offer their best.

An employee who receives positive affirmation of personal performance, performs better as a result of this. Research has found, however, that this trend does not last forever. It is important to keep up the affirmations when they are warranted.

**Summary**

This section dealt with the concept of feedback. It discussed those elements that facilitate successful performance feedback outcomes, such as your ability to use self-disclosure and engender a climate of trust and respect.

It is important to practise interpersonal communication skills to help you obtain relevant and true facts regarding individual work performance, attitudes and behaviours, and to explore underlying feelings.

Having identified who needs training on performance feedback, both formally and informally, you can then explore suitable options for skills-based training for providing performance feedback, both as a planned program, and as on-the-job coaching and mentoring.

Finally, you can then identify and begin planning for reinforcement of performance feedback. This includes attending to individual improvement and development, empowering teams, giving rewards and incentives, and instigating interventions, such as counselling and skills training.

**Ongoing and long-term activities**

While you may have monitored and measured learning and development activities, and have been assured of successful outcomes, there is still a need to sustain success over a longer period of time. For example, a team may achieve their intended learning and development results in the short-term because they have been attracted to incentives being offered.
Despite the best intentions for sustaining such a record, history has shown that performance levels do tend to drop as the reason for improved performance fades. Further motivational reasons have to be found to sustain the high level of performance that has been achieved.

Having planned, coordinated, implemented, monitored, measured and assessed learning and development activities, you would have also considered the potential long term outcomes of learning and development activities.

If, in the event that this process does not result in performance improvement, then consider again remedial and intervention strategies. Coaching and counselling can be used as intermediary and incremental development and improvement responses for maintaining and motivating performance advancement. Both can be ongoing and long-term activities.

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