Help! I have a problem employee

First of a 3-part series on handling problem employees.

People in surgical services must work together to get the job done. Staff members rely on one another for information, supplies, and support. A problem employee creates a weak link that can threaten the quality of services and the safety of coworkers and patients. The longer management tolerates substandard work and negative behaviors in employees, the worse they tend to become. Worse yet, other employees notice that some people are getting away with things and, in time, everyone begins adjusting their performance downward to the lowest level tolerated. Before long, the majority of employees are simply doing just enough to stay out of serious trouble and collect their paychecks. Even potentially excellent staff members function at less than half of their capacity in such an environment.

The way to stop this downward spiraling trend is for managers to recognize, confront, and resolve staff performance problems as quickly as possible. Even overlooking marginal performance can lead to further declines in performance.

Common types of problems

Dealing with employee performance problems is perhaps the most difficult and unpleasant task that managers must perform. Confronting these situations takes time and energy. It may seem easier to just ignore a problem employee. This is not as uncommon as one might think in organizations where firing an employee is a multi-step process. Yet lack of action sets up everyone for lower performance and creates morale problems.

Regardless of how well you manage the people in your department, performance problems will occur from time to time. Some of the more common types of problems are:

- habitual tardiness
- missed deadlines
- doing just enough work to get by
- frequent errors
- being unable to perform a task, even after repeated training
- being slower than others when completing tasks
- avoiding unpleasant jobs.

Looking for patterns

Obvious performance problems, such as an employee showing up for work in an impaired physical state, must be addressed immediately. Passive performance problems, although sometimes more difficult to recognize, must also be addressed. If an employee seems to be having trouble getting the job done or you are receiving complaints about the employee from other staff, look for a pattern:

- Does the employee frequently “forget” policies or procedures?
- Are there regular misunderstandings that get in the way of the job being completed correctly?
- Does the employee continually ignore supervisory directives?
- Is the employee frequently giving reasons why a task cannot be done properly?

Taken case by case, these behaviors may seem inconsequential, but a pattern of such behaviors may be a symptom of employee insubordination. It is important that
you identify and deal with passive performance problems in the same manner as you would for more obvious problems.

**Causes of problems**

Why an employee does not meet performance standards can be generally categorized into 1 or more of 4 causes:

1. Performance standards have not been clearly communicated to the employee.
2. The employee hasn’t received feedback on his or her performance.
3. The employee’s performance is hampered by lack of knowledge, skills, or resources.
4. The employee isn’t motivated or has a negative attitude.

In this first of 3 articles, you’ll learn some techniques for avoiding the common causes of poor staff performance. In the remaining 2 articles, you’ll learn how to handle problem situations that require coaching, counseling, or disciplinary action.

**Cause 1: Standards are not clearly communicated.**

It is the manager’s job to establish performance standards and communicate these standards to employees on an ongoing basis. Remember to be specific when setting standards. Below is an example of performance standards for a circulating nurse with clear and specific performance expectations:

- Functions effectively as a circulating RN.
- Plans, directs, provides, and supervises perioperative care of surgical patients of all ages.
- Assists in setting up and performance of cases by assembling equipment and supplies according to physician preference lists.
- Assists in setting up and performance of cases by opening sterile packs, instruments, and supplies according to sterile technique.
- Performs sponge, needle, and instrument counts with scrubbed person.

Performance standards should not be simply posted or given to employees. During the interview, the new hire’s probationary period, and at regular performance evaluations, the standards and performance expectations should be reviewed with employees. Make sure employees understand the performance standards for their job. To check if an employee understands the standards, one technique is to ask him or her to summarize the expectations.

Remember, employees are not mind readers; they may not know what’s important or critical. Be sure to prioritize tasks and responsibilities. It is also helpful to communicate the big picture and how the employee fits in it.

**Cause 2: Employee hasn’t received feedback.**

All of your staff members need to know how they are doing on a regular basis. Give as much time to praising the good performers as you do to counseling those needing improvement. When an employee excels, even in the smallest ways, point it out. If an employee exhibits poor or marginal performance, don’t wait until the next formal evaluation to point out the problem. As close as possible to the poor per-

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### What to do about bad attitudes

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<th>Reasons for poor motivation or attitude</th>
<th>Suggested actions</th>
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<td>Individual is not committed to your department or organization.</td>
<td>• Describe to the employee how his or her job is critical to the success of the department and the organization. &lt;br&gt;• Secure the employee’s buy-in to the value of the organization’s mission and vision and the department’s contribution.</td>
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<td>Individual is not challenged by the job.</td>
<td>• Ask the employee if he or she has ideas on how to improve the job. &lt;br&gt;• Counsel the employee on how to gain the skills necessary to advance in the department or organization.</td>
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<td>Individual resists change.</td>
<td>• Introduce change in stages, not all at once. &lt;br&gt;• Make sure the employee sees the value and reasons for change and his or her role in making the change successful.</td>
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<td>Individual has personal problems that are affecting work performance.</td>
<td>• Suggest the services of your employee assistance program.</td>
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<td>Individual perceives that co-workers are not doing their jobs, and yet nothing is being done to fix those problems.</td>
<td>• Validate this concern before taking action. &lt;br&gt;• If co-workers are exhibiting poor performance, address the issue immediately! Ignoring poor performance will ultimately affect the whole department. &lt;br&gt;• If poor performance of co-workers is not validated, coach the unmotivated individual.</td>
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<td>High-performing individual is “rewarded” with more work because you know the person will get the job done.</td>
<td>• Distribute workload fairly; otherwise, you’ll burn out your high-performing staff members.</td>
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Source: Patrice Spath, BA, RHIT.
formance, talk with the employee about the problem and jointly explore ways to correct it.

**Cause 3: Employee lacks knowledge, skills, or resources.**

An employee’s work may be hampered by a lack of knowledge or skills to do the job. This can be especially problematic if the employee is given new job responsibilities or expected to work with new technologies or assist with new procedures. If an employee hasn’t been adequately trained on how to do his or her job, it’s unlikely he or she can meet performance expectations. Resolving this cause requires providing instruction in how to do the job. Another obstacle may be existing processes, methods, or systems that interfere with the employee’s ability to do the job. These underlying root causes must be addressed to lessen the impact on staff job performance.

**Cause 4: Motivation and attitude.**

If employees have clear and understandable performance standards, know how they are doing, and have been appropriately trained, there may be another reason why an employee isn’t meeting performance standards—his or her motivation or attitude. To determine if motivation or attitude is a problem, ask yourself, “Has the employee been able to do the job well in the past?” If performance has rarely been a problem, look for other factors. Some common reasons for poor staff motivation or attitude and actions you can take to resolve these factors are in the chart.

Whatever the reasons for poor or marginal performance, you need to address problems when they occur. Not addressing the issue sends the message to everyone in the department that the manager doesn’t see the performance as a problem. Often, silence is interpreted as condoning the behavior. Managers who want to be seen as nice tend to ignore employee problems. These managers often hope problem employees will improve without any intervention, and when they do not, they drop hints. Instead of coaching, counseling, and terminating employees who do not improve, some managers ignore the problems or encourage the employee to transfer to another department. What do these managers get for being nice? They lose their employees’ respect. Staff members know that their manager is shirking responsibility by not dealing with performance problems.

Because causes of employee problems can be broad and varied, and each factor plays on the others, the exact cause may at first be hard to see. But, whatever the cause, the good news is that most times it is curable. Feedback, coaching, and counseling, as well as performance evaluations, are tools managers can use to correct poor performance. All employees should be receiving ongoing feedback and coaching throughout the year as a regular part of their performance cycle. If, after feedback and coaching, the employee is still performing below expectations, the manager should move to counseling.

In part 2 of this series, you’ll learn how to positively address employee performance problems by using good coaching and counseling techniques.

—Patrice Spath, BA, RHIT


She will be speaking at the Managing Today’s OR Suite Conference, Oct 19-21, in San Diego on “Demystifying Comparative Performance Data” and “Reducing Human Factors That Contribute to Errors.”