Managing people

Counseling to help problem employees

Part 2 of a 3-part article.

Every manager has to deal with performance, attitude, behavior, or other employee problems. Too many managers and supervisors seem to want to ignore or minimize the problems, however. For the sake of other employees, managers should deal with problems as they arise. Ignoring the problem can lead to disgruntled co-workers and sends a message to employees that they can underperform or act inappropriately.

One of a manager’s key roles is to help employees learn how to become better employees. When a problem arises that requires you have a discussion with the involved employee, you must become a coach and a counselor. The manager’s role is to assist the employee in understanding the issue at hand, listen to the individual’s feedback, and provide input that will help the employee deal with the issue.

Employee problems fall into 2 categories:
• behavior issues
• substandard performance.

Sorting out the underlying cause is an important first step in the employee counseling process. To determine whether you have a staff member with a performance problem or a behavior problem, ask yourself:
• Is this something the person can do but won’t?
• Is it a condition, circumstance, or behavior over which this person has complete control? If you answer “yes” to either question, you are probably dealing with an individual who has a behavior problem.

Confronting behavior issues

Although it may be uncomfortable to address an employee’s behavior, it is possible to do so effectively. Begin by considering exactly what behaviors you want changed. Write them down and assign a degree of importance to each. A bad attitude can mean many things, so clearly define what behaviors constitute a bad attitude. Just as important, define their impact on the department. Do they cause morale problems? Inefficiencies? Mistakes? Hold a counseling session with the staff member to discuss the changes you want and provide the rationale for the changes. Ask the employee what he or she needs in the way of training or support to make these changes. Explain how you’ll be monitoring the employee’s future performance and what will happen if behavior does not change. Be sure you don’t ignore any future behavior problems or you’ll just reinforce the problematic behavior. Also, make sure to praise the staff member for progress you see.

Plan a course of action

While there may appear to be barriers to changing a problem behavior, these may simply be excuses. Listen carefully to what the employee has to say and probe to determine the difference between an excuse and a truly extenuating circumstance. Before meeting with the staff member, plan your entire course of action. This includes the types of disciplinary actions that you can and are willing to carry out if the behavior does not improve.

To illustrate the importance of preplanning, consider the following situation. I once had an employee who began to arrive late almost every morning. When I asked her for the reason she was late, she said her husband just started working the night shift and often did not get home on time with the car. I reiterated why it was critical for her to be on time and asked what ideas she had for solving the problem. She said she couldn’t control when her husband got home, so there was nothing she could
do. We discussed several possible solutions, including riding the bus or carpooling with neighbors or other hospital employees. No matter what solution I suggested, she had a reason why it wouldn’t work. I had no choice but to tell her that her job required her to be at work at 7 am. If that could not be worked out, I told her I had a part-time afternoon shift position she could have. Of course, it would pay less than she was currently making because of the shorter hours. By the next Monday, she had figured out a way to get to work on time, and we never had another lateness problem.

A behavior problem will be most easily resolved if it is dealt with as soon as it appears. Observe the problem and document it specifically and accurately. Third-hand information is hard to prove and only leads to finger pointing, excuses, and blaming. This means you must spend time around your employees and check out complaints personally.

**Dealing with substandard performance**

Performance relates to an employee’s ability to apply knowledge and skills in actual practice. Performance may relate to specific standards of practice or procedures or to more general aspects of the job such as managing time and communicating with others. If a staff member routinely fails in performing his or her job responsibilities, you are probably dealing with a performance problem.

Start your investigation of the problem by confirming that the staff member knows what is expected and knows the 5 Ws and 2 Hs (who, what, when, where, why, how, and how much) of your expectations. If the individual can’t understand that he or she is doing something wrong, the performance problem may be an easily correctable miscommunication or orientation oversight.

If a performance problem is confirmed, discuss the concern with the individual. Ask questions to draw out the employee’s views of his or her performance and plans for improvement. You can always add points later in the discussion if the employee doesn’t raise them first.

**Formal counseling**

If performance does not improve within the agreed-upon time frame, it is time for a more formal counseling session.

Ensure that the employee is prepared to talk about his or her performance by scheduling the counseling discussion ahead of time. Ask the individual to prepare for the meeting by considering his or her own actions in the areas of concern. The staff member should already be aware of what he or she needs to improve and, if given the opportunity, the person may be able to constructively criticize his or her own performance.

Begin your counseling meeting with a general question about the employee’s performance in the areas of concern: “How would you rate your performance during the last three months?”

If you get a general response like, “Pretty good,” follow up with a more focused question: “What in particular seems to be getting in the way of the plans for improvement we discussed previously?” or “Why do you think we are having this meeting?”

Probe further by asking what the person has already done to improve performance, and provide feedback to substantiate the continued performance problems. Assist the employee in re-evaluating improvement actions by asking, “Knowing what you know now, what would you have done differently?” or “What changes would you make if you worked on this problem again?” By using the probing technique, you can reduce some of the employee’s defensiveness.

**Counseling like a pro**

Addressing behavior or performance problems with an employee is a difficult discussion because it is very personal. “Constructive criticism” is a phrase commonly associated with employee counseling. Many managers struggle to find a way to tell employees that they are performing a job responsibility poorly and need a different approach, a training course, or something else. Unfortunately, many staff
members feel personally criticized and become defensive.

Managers must clearly communicate to an employee that a problem exists, provide constructive feedback, and do it in a caring manner. How a manager handles problems as they arise can have a significant impact on employee morale. If an employee is not made aware of behavior or performance problems, it is more difficult to terminate the individual should that become necessary.

To coach and counsel an employee effectively, keep these things in mind:

• Talk about what you perceive, what you feel, and what you need. Be extremely clear.
• Restate the employee’s remarks by paraphrasing to be sure you fully understand what has been said as the employee discusses the issue.
• Talk about what the employee does. Stay away from personality traits. Address behavior and don’t become a psychologist.
• Zero in on observed or known behavior or performance. Be careful about how you approach an employee about hearsay. Try to avoid dealing with hearsay unless you have a strong reason to suspect it is true.
• Be specific and discuss only one issue at a time.
• Provide some positive feedback in addition to the negative feedback. Try to start the conversation in a positive manner.
• Allow the employee to give feedback freely. But be careful to not get caught in a repetitive conversation that goes nowhere or dwells on excuses.
• Finally and, perhaps most important, listen, listen, listen!

Remember to follow up
Following the counseling session, make sure that what you’ve discussed doesn’t fall through the cracks. This is especially critical if you’re coaching someone for the first time. Make a note in your calendar or computerized tickler file to remind you of the re-evaluation date. Then step back and give the employee a chance to improve—don’t interfere unless asked for assistance.

It is safe to assume that the majority of the people working in surgical services want to do their best, work hard, make good impressions, and get along well with coworkers, managers, and physicians. Although poor performers are not the norm, they are bound to emerge on occasion. The majority of employee problems can be resolved if the manager confronts them—and confronts them as soon as possible. The worst thing you can do is to ignore the problem, hoping it will go away on its own. Effective employee coaching and counseling can help to ensure that small, easily reconciled problems don’t grow into larger, unmanageable ones.

In part 3 of this series, you’ll learn how to address these rare, yet highly stressful, large unmanageable employee performance problems.

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