Your EAP|Here4TN!
for leaders

PaRTNers FOR HEALTH
EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Have a plan for those tough talks

Tammy received a report that one of her trainers, Jennifer, recently had made some negative comments in front of her class of trainees regarding the supervisor to whom they'd soon be assigned. As Tammy sat down to write an email to Jennifer explaining why this behavior was inappropriate, she wondered if this was the right way to quickly address such a sensitive issue.

A manager or supervisor usually has an intuitive sense of when it's time to talk with a team member about a performance or behavior problem. However, it's human nature to want to avoid such potentially uncomfortable conversations. A leader may fear an employee's emotional reaction or worry about making the situation worse. Consequently, the employee problem can linger—having an escalating impact on the work group.

Even though it's a challenge, it is always best to face employee issues promptly and squarely. With thoughtful preparation, you can convene a discussion that supportively helps an employee move toward self-improvement in a timely way.

The leader's attitude toward the employee issue is often a key factor in resolving the issue. When the leader proceeds as a coach and mentor—in a spirit of wanting to support the employee in improving his or her performance—the outcome of the discussion is more likely to be positive. A scolding, punitive or otherwise emotional approach to the discussion is rarely helpful.

This leaders' newsletter provides tips on:

- The value of providing frequent positive feedback to employees.
- How to prepare for potentially difficult employee discussions.
- Conveying constructive criticism in a way that minimizes negative reactions.

Tammy contacted the ParTNers EAP seeking some timely management advice. By calling ParTNers EAP at 1.855.437.3486 and selecting option 4, a licensed workplace support consultant recommended that Tammy prepare for a face-to-face private talk with Jennifer—not an email exchange. Tammy was soon ready to guide Jennifer in keeping her language positive in front of an impressionable group.

Providing positive feedback

Remember that few actions do more to build trust and boost morale than providing sincere, positive feedback.

- Be on the alert for the good, not just the bad. Give at least as much positive feedback as you do negative, and provide it frequently. Positive feedback helps employees gain confidence to learn, grow and contribute.

- Show appreciation. Expressing your appreciation for employees' efforts can have a powerful impact on how they view their work— and on their attitudes about the organization in general.

- Document your observations when you see significant positive performance. Keeping a record of an employee's results shows that you're paying attention. Also, this documentation can be useful as part of a formal performance appraisal.

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Carefully convey constructive criticism

Telling one of your team members that they need to improve an aspect of their work can be uncomfortable. However, problems won't resolve themselves if a leader avoids such conversations. Delivering criticism that's received well and acted upon takes skill, but it's feasible as long as your criticism is constructive, not destructive.

Check your state of mind—Approach the employee issue with a mindset of positive, open inquiry. Try not to label the conversation as "difficult" in advance. This can help keep you from feeling anxious or upset about it beforehand.

Choose the right place and time—Don't target an individual for criticism in a group setting, or when your team member may already appear too burdened or stressed to effectively deal with your recommendations.

Focus on the situation, not the individual—Keep your focus on the process requiring improvement rather than assigning blame. For example, it's better to say, "We need to improve our timeliness on that" rather than, "You're letting everyone down."

Be specific when providing feedback—For example, you might say, "I think the presentation could use more updated statistics and graphics" instead of, "Your presentation wasn't very good."

Stick to fixable issues—Limit your recommendations for improvement to things that are within a person's control. He or she can't speed up a deliverable if the upstream suppliers aren't doing their part.

Provide recommendations for improvement—Adopt a tone of working with your team member to improve the situation. Explain the practical rationale behind your recommendations. A sense of teamwork, rather than accusation, can help the person make the needed adjustments sooner rather than later. It will also strengthen your bond as a work group.

Preparing for a difficult discussion

Your thorough preparation can make the difference between success and failure in a challenging talk with an employee.

☐ Know your objective for the discussion. Decide in advance what you want the discussion to accomplish. Clearly identify the behavior or process that needs to change. Be ready to explain its impact on the work group and/or the organization.

☐ Gather any documentation you have accumulated on the employee's performance so that you'll have it on hand during the discussion. When addressing a problem with someone's work, it's vital to have detailed examples.

☐ Make notes in advance on the key points you plan to cover. Having a general outline of your talk can help you remain calm and objective.

☐ Set up a private meeting (e.g., in a closed-door office without interruptions) to discuss the issue with the employee.

☐ Be prepared to impart corrective action steps that are supportive and positive.

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