Six scripts for talking about performance problems

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You may dread talking about performance problems with your employee. But surveys show that employees actually value negative feedback when it's delivered constructively. So your employee may be more likely to accept your critique and commit to improvement if you present those problems in a fair, concrete and "problem-solving" manner.

Use these strategies and scripts as a framework for talking about performance problems.

Describe the performance problem in specific, nonjudgmental terms

Use clear language that focuses on results and behavior. Don't focus on personality, don't overgeneralize and don't assign blame. Be specific and target your criticism to the behavior, not the person.

Notice the difference in these statements:

- Instead of saying, "Your work's been really sloppy lately," say, "Your last three reports have contained an unacceptable number of statistical errors."
- Instead of making accusations, such as, "Don't you bother to proofread anything you write anymore?," ask the employee to explain ("Is there some reason these errors are occurring?") and ask how you can help improve performance ("How can we prevent these errors in your reports?")

Pro Tip: Address each performance problem individually. Cite specific examples and let the employee respond. Don't bring up a new problem until you've thoroughly discussed the current one.

Reinforce job performance standards

A productive discussion can become sidetracked if you keep talking about why you require a certain performance standard, rather than why the employee's performance hasn't met that standard.

If the employee challenges the standard's validity, calmly state your reasons for requiring it, and gently steer the conversation back to the reasons why the employee didn't comply. If necessary, refer to employees' job descriptions to confirm their responsibilities.

Pro Tip: Be prepared with documentation. If you'll be citing major flaws in the employee's work, be prepared to show concrete examples at the review. Otherwise, the employee may shrug off your comments as hyperbole.

Alternate negative and positive feedback

If you need to address a long list of performance problems, try to interject a few positive comments along the

way. It can be especially instructive for the employee to hear examples of superior performance that require skills and strengths you believe are underutilized in other areas.

Pro Tip: Don't always preface criticism with a compliment because it comes across as insincere and delivers mixed messages. For example, don't say, "You are a good employee but you never get to work on time." Instead, get straight to the criticism in a factual way: "During the past month, you were more than 20 minutes late on six separate days. The job requires that you arrive on time."

Listen to the employee's response

The worst mistake you can make in such meetings is to do all the talking. By listening closely to the employee's response, you can help identify the reason for the poor performance and can begin to explore a solution.

Pro Tip: Be prepared for a counterattack. Is there any chance the employee will complain about unclear explanations or lack of supervision from you? Be prepared for this before you have the conversation.

Develop a performance improvement plan

Agree on a method for improving performance in the short run, and establish further options in case the first method proves ineffective. Offer to help in whatever way you can. Show your commitment by helping employees obtain the necessary resources or training. Explain that you'll be closely observing their progress.

Set a specific improvement goal

In the end, you should have a concrete plan on paper for improving performance, including benchmarks, a timeline and consequences if those short-term goals aren't met. This will allow the employee to leave the meeting with a clear road map to getting back on a path to success.

Phrase performance objectives in a positive way. Ask employees to do more of something, rather than less. Instead of "reducing statistical errors," talk about "increasing statistical accuracy." You can continue to measure accuracy in errors, but focus on what employees are doing right rather than what they're doing wrong.

Rewriting the negative performance review script: 4 examples

Supervisors are more successful in performance reviews when they use clear, nonjudgmental language that focuses on results and behavior. Notice the differences here:

Negative: "Your work has been sloppy lately." (too vague)

Positive: "Your last three reports contained an unacceptable number of statistical errors." (cites specifics)

Negative: "Don't you bother to proofread anything anymore?" (accusatory tone)

Positive: "Is there a reason these errors are still occurring?" (gives employee a chance to explain)

Negative: "You're obviously not a mathematician." (focuses on person, not performance)

Positive: "I know you're capable of producing more accurate work." (reaffirms confidence in employee's abilities)

Negative: "Don't let it happen again." (blanket demands)

Positive: "How can we prevent errors from creeping into reports?" (asks for feedback on improving

performance)

Want more ideas? Check out our list of 90 sample phrases for negative performance reviews.