Put on probation at work? What's next?

No one wants to feel like she’s not doing her job well, so it can be disheartening to be put on a performance improvement plan at work. You may also fear for your job and wonder if it’s possible to redeem yourself.

That’s what one reader asked recently on the Admin Pro Forum:

“I was placed on a performance improvement plan (PIP) at work. I think it’s a way to slowly fire me, and it’s such a morale killer that I don’t have much enthusiasm left for the job. Does anyone ever come back from being on probation and leave the black mark totally behind?” — Violet, insurance researcher

We reached out to some career experts to find out more about performance improvement plans and what it means when you’re put on one.

If you’re put on a PIP, there’s a fairly good chance that the company is either trying to move you on or is suggesting you voluntarily go, says Lara Steel, director at Work Life Innovation. “They’re usually the final resort once the manager feels like they’ve done everything they can.”

A PIP should have one of three possible outcomes, says leadership performance coach Erica Peitler.

1. You improve your performance to the expected level through increased focus and coaching.
2. You improve somewhat, but not enough to reach the targeted expectations. At this point, your manager may implement a second PIP or consider moving you to a different role.
3. You can’t match the expectations of the role, even with coaching. In this case you may be reassigned to another role or fired.

“PIPs should be used and designed to get employees on track and not used in a fearful or threatening way,” Peitler says. Unfortunately, many supervisors avoid PIPs as a way to help struggling employees improve because of the increased time and effort required to manage the process. Instead, the process may be used to punish or push out an employee.

Even if you successfully complete a PIP, it might be time to look for another job, says Todd Rhoad, managing director of BT Consulting. A PIP is usually not a good experience, and your relationship with your manager is often tainted by the process.

Read what Violet’s fellow admins advised.