



Management Assistance Program

HANDLING EMPLOYEES WITH PROBLEMS AT WORK: When Personal Employee Problems Affect Performance and Productivity

GOALS:

The goal of this module is to provide organizations, managers and employees with guidance in dealing with troubled employees at the workplace. This module will show how managers can establish better working relationships with employees, so when problems occur, they have the ability to help employees resolve their work-related issues more effectively.

The specific goals are to help organizations, managers, and employees:

- Establish a professional employee-manager relationship which involves clear expectations, proper work role boundaries, open and honest communication, continuous input, and strong leadership.
- Learn the various indicators of troubled employees from a performance standpoint.
- Take the appropriate steps to help troubled employees by offering helpful resources, developing strategies with them to resolve their performance problems, and taking disciplinary action if necessary.

OVERVIEW:

Like emotions, employees do not leave their personal problems at home when they walk through the door on Monday morning. Employees who experience problems with substance abuse, depression, stress, anger, finances, divorce etc. often bring their issues into the workplace which can affect their job performance and the work environment in a negative way.

While many managers and organizations may believe that an employee's personal problems are not ever the business of the manager—this is not always true. When an employee brings their personal problems to the work site through performance decline, it not only becomes the manager's business, it also becomes the organization's problem. If the manager chooses to ignore the situation, or takes the "it is not my place or problem,"

approach, the problem(s) usually will only get worse, and will eventually take a large toll on the employee, the work environment, and even bottom line. Using depression as an example, The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) reports,

Of the \$44 billion figure, depression accounts for close to \$12 billion in lost work days each year. Additionally, more than \$11 billion in other costs accrue from decreased productivity due to symptoms that weaken energy, affect work habits, and cause problems with concentration, memory, and decision-making. Costs escalate further if a worker's untreated depression contributes to alcoholism or drug abuse, and even more business costs result when an employee or colleague has a family member suffering from depression. The depression of a spouse or child can disrupt working hours, lead to days absent from work, effect concentration and morale, and decrease productivity.¹

This is also the case with substance abuse issues. Employees will suffer at work if they, a family member or close friend, are struggling with substance abuse and it is affecting the employee's ability to function effectively at work. Tom Galligan, Chief Market Development Officer for the Hazelden Foundation, commented in the article, *Family Substance Abuse Affects American Workers*,

"Given the deeply emotional and personal nature of family alcohol and drug abuse, it's easy to see how employees can take these problems to work with them. Even well-meaning employers don't always do enough to address addiction's far-reaching impact within their workforce. Fortunately, there are steps that every employer can take to address it." According to a study by the Hazelden Foundation, more than one-third (36 percent) of employees admitted that at least one of their coworkers had been distracted, less productive, or missed work because of alcohol/drug abuse or addiction within their family. And, more than two-thirds of employees (69 percent) said that if a family member were struggling with alcohol or other drug problems it would negatively affect their ability to concentrate and be productive at work".²

It is essential for managers to work with their employees in establishing a proper working relationship, so when problems arise, the appropriate steps can be taken to resolve them and there are no underlying issues that might interfere with the problem resolution. For example, if the employee feels the relationship with their manager is too rigid, they may be afraid or ashamed to admit they have a problem that is affecting work even though all the signs and symptoms of an underlying problem exist in their deteriorating

¹ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). "Depression in the Workplace." [About.com](http://alcoholism.about.com/library/blnimh16.htm). Available at alcoholism.about.com/library/blnimh16.htm

² Hazelden Foundation. "Family Substance Abuse Affects American Workers" [About.com](http://alcoholism.about.com/od/work/a/blhaz050331.htm). 31 March 2005. Available at: alcoholism.about.com/od/work/a/blhaz050331.htm

performance. On the other hand, if the relationship between the manager and employee is too fluid and casual, the employee may believe it is the manager's responsibility to help them with their personal problems and expect them to forgo any disciplinary action if their performance declines because of these problems.

The manager must make it clear that while they are concerned for the wellbeing of the employee, they are the representative of the organization and cannot shield the employee from the repercussions of declining performance. It is also wise for managers to have a mental or written checklist of the performance behaviors to assist them in recognizing when an employee is bringing his or her problems to the workplace. In addition, managers should be discouraged from immediately punishing employees for minor behavior infractions or initial decline in performance. A rehabilitative or work-related problem solving approach, where a manager works with the employee to help resolve the performance issue, rather than a punitive approach, will prove much more effective in the long run.

OBJECTIVES:

1. Establish a Proper Working Relationship with Employees

Managers set the standards of behavior and have the ability to create proper work place boundaries. They need to develop relationships with their employees that foster trust, positive and negative feedback, and continuous input and support. This professional working relationship should also consist of honest guidelines, clear expectations, and open communication. More importantly, a definitive role clarification between the manager and employee is essential; a manager is a leader, not a friend but person who is ultimately responsible and accountable for the employee's job performance.³

The establishment of this professional working relationship is imperative because it portrays the manager as a representative of the organization and the go-to person for assistance in all aspects of work. A manager should be a trustworthy individual who is there to assist—not judge the employee. It is not the manager's job to provide counseling for the employee, but, to serve as a coach, mentor and problem solver.

If the manager has done his or her job of creating a positive work environment where violations of work policies and boundaries are taken

³ Gaspari, John. "Techniques for Dealing with Troubled Employees." University of Southern California Center for Work and Family Life. PowerPoint presentation available at: usc.edu/dept/socialwork/cwfl/powerpoint/Techniques%20for%20Dealing%20with%20Troubled%20Employees%20web_files/v3_document.htm

seriously, then each employee knows where they stand in relationship to their performance, and the manager is not perceived as “picking on” a certain employee when their performance declines. The manager will be expected to take action when policies are violated, when productivity falls or when the employee is endangering themselves and/or their co-workers.

It is the manager’s responsibility to develop employees and monitor their performance. This places them in a pivotal position to observe changes in workplace behavior and the possible emergence of personal, family, or drug and alcohol problems.⁴

While the managers should never try to diagnose the causes of workplace changes, it is their responsibility to keep on top of these changes and monitor the signs of early performance decline.

2. Signs of a Troubled Employee

One of the most difficult aspects of supervision is recognizing and managing the troubled employee when their issues first appear. Most managers are either too busy or disengaged from their workforce to notice the subtle changes that employees exhibit when they are struggling with work-related or personal issues. In managing others, it is important to be aware of certain behavioral indicators that may suggest that an employee is experiencing difficulty in performing their job. Often the employee will start to exhibit a pattern of performance problems over time. A common error is to assume that an employee's problem is not serious because performance is not significantly impaired. A change in job performance is often the last symptom exhibited when an employee has a personal problem.⁵

The manager should be looking at changes in performance behaviors on three levels:

Level 1 – Intensity: Is it creating a potentially unsafe or hostile work environment?

Level 2 – Frequency: Are there enough small events that warrant an intervention?

Level 3 – Pattern: Is there a pattern that is either time or situation related?

⁴ “Managing the Troubled Employee.” The University of Virginia Health System—Faculty and Employee Assistance Program (FEAP) Available at: healthsystem.virginia.edu/internet/feap/supervisor/ManagingEmployee.cfm

⁵ University of Virginia Health System Faculty and Employee Assistance Program.

The manager should also be aware that there are two types of performance issues:

1. Those that require immediate actions such as impairment, violence, substance abuse, aberrant behaviors, or safety violations and
2. Those that require ongoing documentation and follow-up actions including a corrective interview. These may include: absenteeism, on-the-job absenteeism, work related accidents, lack of concentration, confusion, uneven work productivity, declining work productivity and poor relationships on the job.

While both may be present, the first type represent safety and security issues and need to be resolved through an immediate intervention. The second type can be followed up on later through the levels of intervention as described below.

3. Dealing with troubled employees

Whatever the long term problem may be, depression, stress, finances, family issues, inability to follow company policies etc., it is important for the manager to first take a collaborative (win/win) approach, when confronting the employee to discuss the troubling behavior. When handling an employee with problems on the work site it is sometimes necessary to take a three prong approach such as: 1. Provide Resources, 2. Strategize, and 3. Discipline.

First, provide the employee with available resources for assistance. According to the University of Virginia's Faculty and Employee Assistance Program (FEAP), "encouraging troubled employees to take the first steps in using available resources, such as FEAP, to address these problems may not only help in resolving the performance issues, but may be the most important role you will play with this employee". If that is not sufficient, the manager may need to sit down with the employee and develop a strategy to help resolve or alleviate the work related aspects of the problem. Finally, if the employee fails to overcome the performance problems with the given resources and problem-solving strategy plan, disciplinary action may be necessary.

During the corrective interview the manager may want to gather as much information from the employee as possible by asking poignant questions and then providing "open air space" (silence) to provide the employee with enough time and thoughtfulness to present their situation.

While the corrective interview is never meant to be counseling or personal advice by the manager, the discussion might also include some thoughts regarding the cause of problems in relation to work performance. Open ended questions such as "Why do you think this is happening?" or "What do you think you should do?" may provide some very insightful understanding of where the employee is in their thinking and their ownership.

In addition to the three-prong approach detailed above, it is important to consider the following advice when handling employees with problems on the work site. In the article, "How Can a Manager Deal with Difficult Employees," F. John Reh offers the following advice on handling employees with problems on the work site.⁶

- **Evaluate:** Recognize that most employees can be "difficult" from time to time. This can be caused by stress on the job or away from it. Some employees are difficult more often than others. It is not always your least-productive employees who are difficult. So take a moment to evaluate each situation for the unique situation it is.
- **Do your homework:** Always act on facts and do not base your action on gossip or rumors. If you have not witnessed the inappropriate behavior yourself, look into it, and be sure to collect all the facts before you act.
- **Develop a plan:** Plan the time and place of the confrontation. Select a quiet, private place where you will not be interrupted, and decide if it would be necessary to have others like an HR representative, present in the meeting.
- **Act Quickly:** If possible act quickly but not impulsively. On many occasions the employee's problem is a sensitive issue and must be handled with care. Yet, keep in the mind, the longer an inappropriate behavior is allowed to continue, the harder it will be to change it or stop it.
- **Confront the problem:** Do not put off the problem because it will not "fix itself." It can only get worse.
- **Deal with the behavior, not the person:** Focus on the inappropriate behavior, and do not attack the person. Use "I" statements like, "I need everybody on the team here on time so we can meet our goals" rather than "you" statements like, "you are always late".

⁶ Reh, F. John. "How Can a Manager Deal with Difficult Employees." [About.com](http://management.about.com/od/employeemotivation/a/DifficultEE0605.htm?terms=%22difficult+employees%22). Available at: management.about.com/od/employeemotivation/a/DifficultEE0605.htm?terms=%22difficult+employees%22

- **Do not assume:** Do not assume the inappropriate behavior is caused by negative intent. It may be from fear, confusion, lack of motivation, personal problems, etc. Give the other person a chance to develop a solution to the problem. They are more likely to "own" the solution if they are at least partially responsible for developing it.
- **Be conscious of the employee's feelings:** If possible, try to draw out the reasons behind the behavior. As you talk with the difficult employee, actively listen to what they say. Stay calm and positive, but remain impartial and non-judgmental. Ask leading questions that can't be answered in one or two words, and do not interrupt. Summarize back to them what they just said, "so what I understand you are saying is", so they know you are actually listening to them. If you can find out from the difficult employee what the real source of the inappropriate behavior is, you have a much better chance of finding a solution.
- **Is Once Enough?** Sometimes these confrontations will go smoothly, or at least rapidly, to a conclusion. Other times it will require several sessions to resolve the problem. Minor problems, like being late for work, it may be possible to resolve with a simple chat in your office with the employee. An office bully, who has used that behavior successfully since elementary school, may need more than one confrontation before a solution can be reached. Be patient. Do not always expect instant results. Aim for continuous improvement rather than trying to achieve instant success.
- **Know when you are in over your head:** Sometimes the underlying issue with a difficult employee will be beyond your capabilities. The employee may have psychological problems that require professional help. Learn when to keep trying and when to refer the employee to others for more specialized help. Your company may have an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or you may need to use resources from the community.

SUMMARY: Tips for Dealing with Troubled Employees

- For managers, remember that an employee's personal problems become a work place issue when the problem affects the employee's job performance and threatens the well-being of the employee and other staff members.
- Develop a professional employee-manager relationship that fosters trust, communication and leadership.
- Establish a definitive role between the manager and employee is essential. A manager is a leader, not a friend but a person who is responsible and accountable for the employee's job performance.
- Be aware of indicators that may suggest that an employee is experiencing difficulty in performing their job such as changes in behavioral patterns, intensity or frequency.
- When confronting an employee, remember to do your homework, to deal with the behavior not the person, and to be conscious of the employee's feelings. Personal issues are difficult to address, and the employee must trust that all conversations are confidential to the greatest extent possible for the manager.
- Try not to always punish and discipline staff for their poor performance or inappropriate behavior. Instead, try a collaborative approach where the manager works with the employee to develop a solution to the problem that is affecting their job performance. If collaboration doesn't work then compromise or rehabilitation may be the next step.
- Provide the employee with resources where they can seek help for their problems.
- If resources are not enough help and the situation requires work related solutions (not personal), make time to develop a strategy to help the employee overcome or alleviate their performance problem(s).
- Learn when to keep trying and when to refer the employee to others for more specialized help. And, learn when it is necessary to take disciplinary action—especially if the employee is endangering themselves or other staff members.