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PERFORMANCE ISSUES

Head Off Problem Staff Issues Early for Best Results

Busy season will soon be upon your firm, and with tight staffing and growing workloads, good performance from every employee is critical.

The shortage of quality talent means that your firm may have more than your share of problem employees—they have issues but you simply cannot replace them, especially with the onslaught of busy season work that is about to descend on the firm. Unfortunately, it can be hard even in ideal staffing situations to deal with a problem employee, and even more difficult to take fast action.

"This is a problem faced by many leaders," said Jennifer Forgie, managing partner at OnPoint Consulting, an organizational and leadership consulting firm (www.onpointconsulting.com). "They are hesitant to deal with performance issues, so they send indirect messages and subtle signals or simply avoid the situation hoping it will go away."

Problems don't go away by themselves, of course. "Ultimately, the leader's reticence to deal with the below-standard-performing employee leads to another problem," Forgie noted, "When it comes to the point where the person's performance or behavior can no longer be tolerated, and the poor performer is told she or he must improve, it often comes as a shock because this is the first they are hearing that there is a problem."

Damage control. What can you do right now to keep below-standard performers from snowballing

out of control, especially at your busiest and most important time of the year? The first step is to take a hard look at your firm's performance management system and determine whether it's serving you by identifying real issues—and providing the structure to both inform the problem staff person and set up a path for improvement.

'Until you can articulate specific behaviors and outcomes, it is very difficult to communicate when standards are or are not being met.'

In addition, consider the following tips for giving your "below standards" a shot in the arm:

1. Paint a clear picture of what good performance looks like. "In order to be able to pinpoint poor performance, you need to get very clear about what high performance looks like and translate that into specific behaviors and outcomes. Then you have to share those behaviors and outcomes with employees," said Forgie.

"It's not enough to simply say, 'Joe, you need to be more proactive.' Well, what does that really look like? Perhaps Joe isn't taking the initiative to share information with team members or he isn't informing clients of key decisions. Until you can articulate specific behaviors and outcomes, it is very difficult to communicate when standards are or are not being met."

2. Communicate your expectations. Clear and agreed-upon expectations provide a solid foundation on which to provide recognition and reinforcement as well as guidance and corrective feedback. It's not fair to hit people with corrective feedback or a bad review if you haven't made your expectations clear.

"When you're setting goals, it's helpful to clearly state, 'Here's what meeting expectations looks like and here's what exceeding expectations would look like,'" says Forgie.

3. Don't let expertise or revenue production be a get-out-of-trouble-free card. Members of your firm who are brusque, arrogant, or condescending with colleagues are slowly poisoning your culture. Is the money they bring in worth the disruption and resentment their behavior creates? Probably not.

"The biggest challenge for leaders is to take corrective action with a top producer" whose behavior is not consistent with their promises, Forgie says. "If the espoused values are to have any real meaning, then *how* something gets done must be considered just as important as *what* gets done."

If such individuals are among your partner group, consider the far-reaching effects upon not just that partner's attitude and actions: consider, too, that this partner is setting an example for bad behavior by staff.

4. Raise performance concerns while they are fresh. These conversations can be easier when you clearly describe and agree upon goals and expectations for behavior. Feedback during busy season engagements can be an excellent way to point out immediate issues so that staff can work to correct them.

"There's no doubt that most people hate confrontation," notes Forgie. "It can be awkward and difficult, but it must be done; it's the only way to prevent performance issues. When goals and expectations for behavior have been clearly described and agreed to, these conversations can be easier. It doesn't have to get ugly if you focus the discussion on the agreed-upon behaviors and performance targets."

5. Provide scheduled and impromptu coaching and feedback. Behavior change is much more successful when efforts are regularly reinforced. This means giving individual feedback (both positive and constructive) about progress on goals periodically and consistently through scheduled meetings and on-the-spot chats—not just once a year at the annual performance review.

Leaders should stay on top of this strategy, even if the performance management system does not require it. It can be a real challenge to add even more responsibilities to the already busy months ahead, but this particular task can and will pay off in helping to make staff more productive and to reduce problems.

6. Celebrate small victories. Another key in turning around performance problems is to recognize progress toward improvement. "Too often managers reserve recognition for their top performers or 'save it up' until poor performers get up to standard," says Forgie. "While it is clearly important to recognize high performers, it is just as important to recognize *all* positive behavior, especially when it's a step in the right direction. This helps build momentum and confidence, and it reinforces the behaviors that are needed for this person to turn around."

7. Train managers to assist with goal setting and coaching. Without these fundamental skills in your partners, supervisors, and managers, and other firm leaders, no performance management system, rating scale, technology, or form can turn performance problems around. Sixty-two percent of respondents to OnPoint's survey provided managers with training to conduct effective performance evaluations, and 53% offered training related to setting goals and coaching and feedback.

Dealing with all employees in a deliberate, structured way can stop downward spirals. But if it doesn't, says Forgie, at least you will have the all-important paper trail that enables you to support your rationale for letting them go and minimize any worries about legal retaliation. □

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