

## DR. LOIS FRANKEL

*Get and keep the job you want.*

Problem employee or employee with a problem? Sometimes it's difficult to know the difference, but that difference is critical to how you successfully resolve a performance concern. Given how expensive it is to recruit, hire, train, and compensate employees (not to mention the cost associated with some separations) you're far better off solving the problem than moving toward disciplinary procedures that usually don't work or terminating the employment relationship. Here are a few tips for how you can resolve performance concerns without creating unwarranted morale problems or liability in the process.

1. Always point the finger at yourself first. Ask yourself what you may have done to contribute to unacceptable performance. Have you provided enough training? Feedback? Resources? If you're not sure, ask the employee. A comment like, "I've noticed you're having difficulty with the monthly QC reports. I'm wondering what I may have missed when training you or how I can help" can go a long way toward opening a productive dialogue.
2. Exhibit unconditional positive regard toward the staff member. I always say employees don't get up in the morning, come to work, and decide to make your life miserable (even though it may feel like it). Regardless of how the employee is acting, your role as a leader requires you to treat people with respect and dignity. Berating, ignoring, or abusing the employee until he or she quits are not signs of respect.
3. Be a coach, not a disciplinarian. If you're pretty sure you've done everything right, but the employee is still struggling, have a coaching session where you discuss the problem behavior, identify the reasons why it's happening, and find mutually acceptable solutions. If necessary, write the words "what's the problem; why is it happening; where do we go from here" on a piece of paper to guide your discussion and keep it on track. Be sure to define objective and measurable steps for addressing your concerns (and those of the employee).
4. Consider whether or not the job is right for the employee. You'll notice I didn't say "if the employee is right for the job." The latter way of looking at it suggests he or she may have failed to meet expectations. The former is an indication of the desire to ensure the employee's job satisfaction. So many times what appear to be performance problems are really mismatched people and jobs. Do you know what really turns the employee on? What he or she most loves to do? If not, find out. If they're better suited for another career help them get into it without the fear of being fired. You'll be doing both of you a favor.

5. Don't let things ride. If a staff member is doing something ineffectively or inappropriately don't wait until you can't stand it any longer to talk about it. This will only make the discussion unnecessarily emotionally charged. Instead, with your coaching cap on, talk about what you're observing and ask permission to give some suggestions for doing it better or correctly. Most importantly, never wait for a performance review to discuss poor performance. Nothing makes an employee madder and contributes to more ill will than receiving a performance review with negative surprises. The rule of thumb is never put anything on the performance review about which you haven't already spoken with the employee.
6. Conduct an "interim performance review." Take your company's usual performance review form and fill it out for the employee. Then meet with the employee and say, "If I had to do your performance review today, this is what it would look like. Now I don't want to have a review like this in your file, so let's talk about what it would take to get a better one." Then shift to coaching.
7. Follow-up regularly. A maxim in organization development circles is "what gets monitored gets done." By following up at regular intervals you let the staff member know you're serious and expect change. If you don't, you send the message it wasn't that important to you.
8. Use the "day off with pay" technique. Before you make a final decision to terminate an employee, call him or her into your office, express your frustration over not seeing improvement despite all of your discussions and coaching, and tell the employee he or she will be given the next day off with pay. The purpose of the day off is for him or her to consider whether he or she wants to continue employment with your company and if so, what they commit to doing differently to keep their job. In other words, they have to come in with an action plan. Also tell him or her if they realize it's not the right place or job for them, you will do everything possible to ensure a smooth transition out. The caveat here is, the employee is responsible for coming up with a viable solution. If they can't you will have no alternative but to terminate them.
9. If you've done all of the above in good faith and with relative skill and they don't work, you can move toward a "positive" termination. You can let the person leave with as much self-respect in tact as possible under the circumstances by:
  - Giving as much separation pay and outplacement assistance as is appropriate for the position, length of service, and company precedent.
  - Discussing what other employees will be told and if it doesn't present a legal problem, consider letting him or her resign.
  - Making suggestions for how to get started seeking alternative employment.
  - If privacy is of concern to the employee, arranging for him or her to remove personal belongings before or after business hours (with you present of course).
  - Thanking the employee for what he or she did do well and wishing him or her the best of luck.

Until next month, stay well and don't forget you can always write to let us know if you have any questions you would like answered in our monthly coaching tips.

Best regards,

Lois P. Frankel, Ph.D.