

What Can I Do About Poor Performers at Work?

*Effective Performance Management
Is All About Honesty and
Direct Communication*

By Jan Bynum

So what's the right way to address poor performance? The answer is really quite simple: honestly and directly. Just how difficult is it to be honest? And clear communication often requires being direct—but without being mean or cruel.

It's far more loving to be honest than to mislead employees about their performance. Jesus Christ was certainly loving, but he was also honest and direct with people.

The difficulty most managers encounter when addressing poor performance is their lack of openness. They've either expressed approval or, more often, haven't said anything at all. This leaves employees feeling all is well.

The Annual Appraisal

Then the time for the dreaded performance appraisal arrives. As the manager begins to review the performance categories, he or she is suddenly faced with a problem: "satisfactory" performance doesn't line up with what the employee has been doing.

The manager now faces a dilemma. Is it time to tell the truth, acknowledging the previous lack of candor? Or does he or she just let another year roll by and give the employee a satisfactory or better review, planning to address performance issues during the coming year? But then another year goes by without any action taken.

What a vicious cycle we create for ourselves, resulting mostly from a lack of honesty. If we refuse to accept poor performance or poor behavior from the start, then we have nothing to "undo." But when we allow poor performance or poor behavior, we then have to undo what we've allowed. This can be a difficult process, but not an impossible one. Once again, it involves an honest and direct approach.

Optimal Performance Management

The best way to approach performance issues is to tell the employee on day one what's expected, in order to meet acceptable job standards. And from that day on, be clear about the expected results, holding the employee accountable to meet those standards.

Of course, for new employees, there'll be a learning curve, but once past that and performance is still less than satisfac-

tory, you *must* directly and honestly address the issues. Spell them out, but don't exaggerate or use subjective scenarios. Focus on behaviors, not attitudes.

Use examples of incidents and factual data to clarify the issues. It's hard for an employee to argue with the facts, but one can easily argue with such generalities as "usually," "often," or "everyone says."

Poor Performance Management

The problem in many ministries is that managers don't clearly describe to new employees what's expected of them. Then, as an employee makes mistakes or behaves unacceptably, the manager overlooks it, chalking it up to being new, or just a phase.

Finally, the manager gets tired of all the mistakes or improper behavior and decides to tackle the problem. The difficulty at this point is that the mistakes and/or bad behavior have become habits, making them harder to address, and even harder to change.

Now the employee is confused, because this is how he or she acted or performed for some time, and it was okay. So why is it now *not* okay? Suddenly, a more difficult performance management issue has been created.

At this point, many managers start looking for a way out, rather than tackling the issues. They either look for somewhere to transfer the employee, letting another manager deal with the problem, or start "building a case" for dismissal. All this occurs because the manager wasn't honest from the beginning.

A Ripple Effect

An added dynamic is the effect this has on other employees. They observe poor performers going on without suffering any consequences and one of two things happens: the good performers leave and take their good work ethic and skills elsewhere, or they let their work slide, becoming a performance management issue themselves.

The longer a manager allows poor performance to go unchecked, the greater the chances for legal ramifications when he or she finally decides to tackle the issue. The poor performer often sees it as harassment, since there's been no

indication from the beginning that there was a problem.

Key Ingredients

There are three important tools to use in good performance management: results, measurements and standards.

■ **Results are what a manager expects an employee to achieve.** In accounting, for example, the desired result may be to have donations recorded and receipts mailed to donors in a timely fashion.

■ **Measurements are what a manager uses to determine whether the employee has achieved the desired results.** The accounting employee is consistently late in mailing receipts.

■ **Standards are what a manager measures against to determine acceptable job performance.** The accounting standard is that all receipts must be mailed within 48 hours after the donation has been received.

Standards are generally based on the quality and quantity of work performed by your best employees. If the best employee in accounting can process donations and mail receipts within 24 hours, this becomes the standard for excellent performance, with good performance standards set somewhat lower.

Thus, the manager is able to objectively measure an employee's success or failure. The employee knows from the beginning what's expected—the measurement is objective and verifiable, and based on facts. Observable, verifiable facts are difficult for employees to dispute.

The Importance of Feedback

Timely feedback is critical to success and should be a routine part of performance management for all employees, regardless of performance. If an employee has performed poorly, or behaved poorly, immediate feedback is critical, but it's just as important to be objective and specific about behavior or performance. Record objective facts, not subjective impressions or interpretations, and focus on behaviors, not attitudes or personalities.

Feedback must be based on observed, documented, work-related behaviors, actions, statements, tasks and results. People are less likely to feel judged when

the feedback is based on observed facts. It's important to ask the employee to *do something differently*, rather than just asking them to *be different*.

Let's take the example of an employee arriving late to work. First, you state to the employee your *specific observations*: "I noticed you arrived late to work on Monday and Tuesday, coming in at 8:20 a.m. rather than 8:00 a.m." You then state the *performance impact*: "As a result of your late arrivals, other employees had to leave their work areas to cover for you." Finally, you request *employee input*: "I'd like to discuss the reasons for your late arrivals."

The discussion is intended to "redirect" performance so the employee can be successful. Employees generally want to know what it takes to be successful, and managers want employees to know they have confidence in their ability to succeed. If a manager communicates

honestly with employees about their performance, the chances are much better that their behavior can be changed.

Performance management is all about honesty. Managers shouldn't think of performance management and the "dreaded" appraisal as a confrontation, but rather as the opportunity to have a loving and honest conversation with a fellow Christian. After all, each of us is on the same team, in our ministry and spiritual journey through life.

Jan Bynum is vice president of human resources for Volunteers of America Texas, Fort Worth, Texas. She is a member of CMA's Human Resource Management Resource Commission and a faculty member for CMA Long Beach 2005. You may email her at jbynum@voatx.org.



© 2005, Christian Management Association. All rights reserved.

Victims: Be Your Own First Responder!

By Anita Schamber

As a coach, I've observed that people who experience "being fired" can interpret the event as a blessing, a lesson learned, or a membership card in the "cult of victimhood."

In *The 8th Habit: From Effectiveness to Greatness*, Stephen R. Covey says we're a society of people who need to find fulfillment and significance by finding our "voice"—our unique personal significance—and to inspire others to do the same. Perhaps "being fired" can be a blessing, if it awakens within us the discovery of our voice—our passion, talents and conscience. Being fired can teach us to hold ourselves accountable for the results—positive or negative—of our behaviors and attitudes.

But being fired often feeds the "burned-again" victimization of those who believe the world (or various persecutors) are out to "get them." To stay in the rut, the victim *must* find a rescuer: someone who will side with their assessment, intervene for them, and assume their responsibility, letting the victim comfortably remain in his or her

gloom-decorated hole. Covey points out that people who remain victims "give away their future" and lose one of the greatest gifts we have: *choices*.

While victim language comes up frequently in coaching, hard-core victims aren't coachable until they see the light. They must increase their self-awareness and self-management, and assume more accountability for their life and work experiences. Once they become a "first responder" to their own bondage, they're more apt to consider other changes in their lives. Only then can they truly benefit by working with a coach.

Anita Schamber is a senior associate for leadership and organizational development for World Vision International, Seattle, Wash., and a nationally certified coach and counselor, specializing in executive and life/work coaching. She's on the faculty of CMA Long Beach 2005 and serves as a member of CMA's Leadership & Management Resource Commission. She may be reached at aschambe@worldvision.org.

