Nottinghamshire County Council

Having Difficult Conversations

Introduction

Challenging poor performance is one of the most sensitive issues a manager will have to address. The prospect of upsetting a colleague, being subjected to an angry outburst or becoming the subject of a harassment complaint or a grievance can deter managers from beginning the process of performance management. However, avoiding these difficult discussions may have much worse consequences in the longer term. Failure to raise concerns about performance at the earliest opportunity denies the employee the opportunity to improve. They will continue to perform at the same unacceptable level, believing that their work is satisfactory.

This can cause additional problems including resentment among teams and the possibility that the issue becomes so serious that it cannot be allowed to continue. Ultimately, the gap in performance which could easily have been closed by early management intervention may become too big for the employee to close. If managers fail to act, the standard of performance may be considered the service norm and others may dip to that level. In high performing teams, it is recognised that praise is given when deserved and issues are tackled straight away. This helps develop a positive attitude and one where colleagues are willing to assist a team member who may be struggling.

The manager who encourages open dialogue within the team will find it easier to have the more difficult conversations and may even find the employee relieved to have the issue addressed. It is possible that they may have been finding the work difficult to manage but were not confident to raise it as an issue for fear of being punished.

Preparation

Before raising the performance issues with the employee, the manager should prepare properly. This requires that the manager to be absolutely clear about the requirements for the role and the ways in which the employee is underperforming.   A vague sense of them "not being good enough", particularly when compared to colleagues, will not suffice.   By having a complete grasp of the issues, linked to the competency framework, will allow the manager to be confident in clearly communicating the performance shortfall. The manager will focus on the issue and not the person and ensure that the discussion stays on track.

As well as understanding the issues the manager should have all relevant documents to hand to share with the employee. The manager should also give consideration to the options for actions to improve the performance and reasonable timescales in which to make the required improvement.

The manager should also consider how the employee may react. The employee may be upset, silent, accepting, angry or defensive. It is possible they will become too upset for the discussion to continue immediately. The manager may offer a brief break for the employee to compose themselves but it must be made clear that the conversation will resume as the points at issue are too important to ignore. In having a clear purpose for the discussion, that is, to gain an acceptance that there is a performance issue, it will enable the manager and employee to move to a position where they agree what needs to be done to address this.

On occasion, the employee will refuse to accept any responsibility for the issues under discussion. They may blame colleagues or challenge the manager's view that their performance is below the required standard. In these situations, it is vital that the manager goes through the relevant pieces of information which they have considered in forming the view that there is a problem.

Step guide to the discussion

1. Start by explaining the purpose of the discussion, that is, to share concerns about a performance issue; to gain the employees view; and to agree actions to assist the employee meet the required standards.

2. Explain the situation from the manager's perspective. If it is serious, then make sure the employee understands this. It will not be helpful in the longer term if the manager underestimates the size of the performance gap when in reality there are very serious concerns about the work being undertaken.

3. Ask for response, ascertain whether the employee considers the manager's view is justified

4. Monitor the employee's responses – progress will be difficult if they are too upset / angry

5. If there is acceptance of the poor performance then the conversation can move on to explore reasons why this might have occurred and seek to agree how this can be addressed

6. If there is no acceptance, listen to what the employee says and the basis for belief that their performance is acceptable. If you feel confident after hearing this that you are correct to be concerned about their performance, then you will need to explain why you do not agree. You will also need to state that as you have identified a performance issue, you still need to identify actions and targets for improvement. If the employee will not co-operate, the manager may suggest that they write to the employee and give them additional opportunity to consider the manager's comments. However there may be information from the employee that the manager would wish to consider further, such as evidence of inconsistent standards, disagreements about what the duties

of the post actually are or there are more accepted standards of performance than the manager is applying. In these circumstances, the manager may wish to end the meeting to enable them to seek advice or to give further thought to the issues.

7.   Discuss the options for raising improvement and agree an improvement plan with defined actions and also defined and timetabled improvement milestones.

8.   Ask if there is anything else that the employee would wish to say.

9.   Explain that the discussion and actions will be confirmed in writing within a defined period following the meeting.

Ensure that the employee understands the necessity for improvement and the consequences of not doing so and finally confirm that the purpose of this process is to assist the employee to reach the required standard of performance.