
MANAGER'S GUIDE TO CONDUCTING AN EFFECTIVE COUNSELING SESSION

Counseling is a process that occurs between a supervisor and an employee that has as its objective some positive change in the employee's behavior or performance. A counseling session should explain:

- ✓ What the employee is doing wrong
- ✓ Your expectations concerning appropriate conduct or performance
- ✓ Any assistance that management may provide
- ✓ Possible consequences to the employee if he or she fails to correct the behavior or performance.

Preparation

Prepare for a counseling session with an employee much like you would prepare for any other important interview:

- ✓ Identify the issues that you want to discuss and write them down.
- ✓ Collect the facts that support the need for counseling and
- ✓ Gather any documentation to support the topic of discussion.

For example if the issue is unscheduled absences, you would want to have:

- ✓ Copies of the employee's Requests for Leave (OPM Form 71) along with
- ✓ Time and attendance records showing unscheduled absences
- ✓ A copy of your Leave Policy

If the issue is poor performance you would need:

- ✓ A copy the employee's Performance Plan
- ✓ Any guidance the employee has been given on performance.
- ✓ Specific examples of the employee's poor performance
- ✓ Specific examples of acceptable performance
- ✓ Operating manuals, guides or training that may be available to help your employee improve his/her performance.

Counseling sessions should not be impromptu. Schedule your session with the employee in advance and arrange for a private setting so that you and your employee are

comfortable discussing confidential issues. Since many of us work in cubicles you may need to ask to use someone's private office or schedule a conference room. Make sure that wherever you choose to conduct the meeting, you coordinate it so that you will not be disturbed – redirect your phone calls and turn off your mobile device. A good rule of thumb is to allow about an hour for a counseling session. Most sessions will not last any longer than that and you can always schedule an additional meeting if you need more time.

Delivery

- ✓ Be calm, professional, and focused.
- ✓ Start out with a simple statement of the problem and avoid broad, general conclusions. For example, "The time and attendance sheets show that you have been late to work 4 times over the last pay period" rather than, "You are always late for work."
- ✓ Listen to any feedback from the employee concerning the conduct in question and consider some possible solutions for improvement, but keep in mind that the employee's conduct or performance is their responsibility and it is up to that employee to correct it.
- ✓ Beware of the employee who always seems to have a "good reason" for the conduct in question. For example, an employee with a tardiness problem can cite any number of "good reasons" for the tardiness such as non-working alarm clocks, day care problems, transportation issues, etc.
- ✓ Remind the employee that it's his or her responsibility to solve those problems and report to work on time just like everybody else in the work unit.
- ✓ When appropriate, offer the services of the Employee Assistance Program to help the employee solve personal problems.

Counseling for Poor Performance

Counseling that addresses conduct issues such as tardiness or failure to follow instructions can be cut and dry. However, counseling employees on performance-based issues can be a little more involved. While there is no statutory requirement to give any kind of oral counseling to employees with unacceptable performance, it is a good idea to give them an informal opportunity to improve before taking any formal action. Ideally, to assist an employee in improving his/her performance you will need some participation and input from that employee in identifying exactly what it will take to bring his/her performance up to an acceptable level.

- ✓ Use active listening skills to engage the employee
- ✓ Ask open-ended questions
- ✓ Paraphrase
- ✓ Be patient
- ✓ Don't argue
- ✓ Use silence to draw your employee into the discussion

Use the session to collaborate with your employee to create a plan to increase his/her performance that will involve both of you working together. That plan may involve:

- ✓ Scheduled follow-up meetings
- ✓ Regular email correspondence
- ✓ Training
- ✓ Assigning a mentor to your employee.

Whether you are counseling an employee for misconduct or poor performance, make sure that you state what you expect the employee to do: “In the future you must come to work as scheduled” or “The use of profanity will not be tolerated in public areas” or “Your assigned projects must be turned in on time with no more than 3 edits.” You should also clearly state the consequences of the employee's failure to correct the behavior, however do not promise something that you are unable or unwilling to deliver. For example, “If you are late again, I'll suspend you for 5 days,” could end up being an empty promise. It's a good idea to check your agency's Table of Penalties in advance and if you feel that future misconduct could result in disciplinary or adverse action, you may want to check in with your Deciding Official and/or your servicing Labor and Employee Relations Office prior to your session.

Follow-up

- ✓ Document the discussion
- ✓ Reiterate the points made during the session
- ✓ Give a copy to the employee and/or email
- ✓ Follow up regularly with your employee
- ✓ Ensure that any agreements that you discussed regarding training opportunities or development take place.
- ✓ Provide positive feedback on any improvement
- ✓ Contact your Labor and Employee Relations Specialist for advice and assistance if there is no improvement

Conclusion

Conducting effective counseling sessions and providing constructive feedback on conduct or performance are learned skills that are honed over time by practice. No one likes confrontation but unaddressed conduct and performance issues will only get worse, creating more work and lowered morale for you and your employees. It can be difficult at first but you will quickly see that regular feedback and communication with your employees will make your job easier in the long run and by following some of the steps in this guide, you will find yourself becoming more and more confident in these situations.