



Management and Performance Associates – March/April 2008

Breaking up is hard to do.

What you should have done before letting a poor performer go.

Few management actions are as stressful as letting someone from your staff go. It is emotionally challenging to the manager, the staff, and the remainder of the team.

A break up always represents an emotional toll. The idea is to reduce the emotional burden when your staff is let go for poor performance.

Start by reflecting on how legitimate the action is. The first reflection: the action is legitimate only if it is the *last* managerial action. Often, it is the first, without a genuine effort to recover the staff member's performance.

A reasonably successful recovery process requires that the manager be supported by three pillars: skill, strategy and attitude.

1) Skill: providing feedback

Performance does not deteriorate overnight, except in rare circumstances. Chances are, the staff member was sending several signals that something was not working well.

It can be a subtle reduction - or not – in the quality of the work performed. Or, it can be a challenging but realistic goal which is only partially achieved. Showing increasing apathy or bad humor and being late are among the most common signals of trouble.

If you just wait for the staff member to return to his/her previous performance level, without any intervention, it will probably bring no results and frequently generate frustration to all involved. Therefore, at the first signal of performance deterioration, have a conversation with your staff member, give him/her performance feedback which is fact based, and jointly identify the causes for the decrease in performance.

Remember that effective feedback needs to be timely, supported by data and constructive in its format and tone.

2) Strategy: to recover performance

Recovery of performance needs to be supported by a clear strategy. This strategy is composed of four steps:

- a. Clearly say, with no ambiguity, what your expectation is in relation to your staff member's performance. Expectations are twofold: in relation to goals, and more importantly, in relation to behavioral aspects.
- b. State what the current level of performance is (providing feedback). Your staff member should have no questions about the gap he/she should work on reducing.
- c. Clarify the consequences you are willing to apply should performance not improve. Be very careful on how you deliver your message: describing a consequence is not the same as threatening someone. Depending on the seriousness of the case, a disciplinary procedure should be started. If that is the case, always check with your Human Resources professional before applying any disciplinary procedure.
- d. Jointly build an action plan. Decide what will be done, when it will be done, and what support is needed for the action to be successful.

3) Attitude: Maturity

Surely, this is *the* critical pillar for success. Nothing is more unfair and ethically wrong than decisions made on prejudices that the manager may have developed toward the staff member. Have you ever heard of the self-fulfilling prophecy? The essence of this prophecy is in the connection between beliefs and behaviors, i.e., if a manager believes that a certain staff member has no potential to be developed, obviously, he/she will do nothing to



develop this person. Why should I place my bets in a bad investment?

As the manager does nothing to support this person, most probably he/she will not be developed. The manager, very proud of his/her "ability to assess people" will be setting this person up for failure, not because the staff member could not recover from a bad performance, but because the manager did nothing, once he/she did not believe in the employee.

Before acting, reflect upon the beliefs you have created about this performer. Are you being fair?

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

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