

NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

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NEGOTIATING POOR PERFORMANCE



■ **Raphael E. Lapin**

When we think about the word “negotiation” we tend to associate it with the crafting of a major deal, partnership or alliance or even the resolving of some international dispute. The truth however, is that any interests that can only be met through the cooperation of another party, no matter how large or small, requires negotiation. This may at times involve someone on the other side of the world and at other times, the person in the next office. An example of a less obvious “negotiation” is addressing an otherwise competent and qualified employee or coworker’s poor performance. We frequently try to impose our standards by means of authority and command and while sometimes appropriate, we will often achieve greater results with a negotiation approach. In this month’s column, we offer some guidelines in dealing with poor performance in a constructive way.

Identifying Symptoms

When an employee exhibits signs of poor performance consistently, do not give up hope too hastily. His/her performance may be symptoms of underlying problems which you could help to resolve. However, before you can help them, you need to spot the symptom and diagnose the cause. At the first sign of sub-optimal performance of an employee, it is important that you observe him/her carefully. Look for signs of lethargy, lack of enthusiasm and energy, consistent tardiness, frequent health problems, anger, depression, or any other sign that all is not well. When these kinds of symptoms are

present, you should see poor performance as a call for help rather than an obstinate refusal to cooperate or mere incompetence. Ask yourself: “What might be causing his/her poor performance and how can I help this person reach his/her potential?” Consider causes such as objectives not being clearly defined or unrealistic, insufficient feedback, tasks too challenging or not challenging enough, and lack of confidence in their own ability. There could also be personal reasons such as an ailing parent or marital problems. Before dismissing a potentially valuable employee due to poor performance, make sure you have attempted to uncover and diagnose any underlying problem that may be present.

Addressing Poor Performance

Once you have identified poor performance and spotted behavior patterns that suggest an underlying problem, you need to address

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it with the employee. Confront issues as soon as possible after they become apparent. The longer they are left to be, the more potential damage they can cause. Talk to your employee and try to jointly figure out what the problem is in a supportive and encouraging way. Always try to elicit your employee’s input when resolving problems. You might say: “I have noticed that there were several instances where your performance was not great. Last week you were not ready with the presentation and someone else had to pick up the slack. The previous week, accounting found several mistakes in your financial reports. I have also noticed a general lack of enthusiasm coming from you and I am concerned about you. My sense is that you are going through a difficult time and I would like to help you”. Show your employee that you are concerned about him/her and you are there to support, encourage and help him/her to improve. By approaching it in this manner you have sent a message of under-

standing, sympathy and support thereby allowing your employee to self-disclose safely.

Knowing Your Limitations

There will be times when after listening, careful questioning, suggesting ideas, and engaging the employee in designing possible solutions, you will still come up empty-handed. This is the time to recognize your limitations and seek help elsewhere. Do not see this as a failure on your part, but rather as a doctor that at times needs to refer a patient to a specialist. You might need to refer an employee to someone who has more expertise or experience in handling the issue. Use all the resources available to you. Get advice from other managers. Get help from executives. Speak to the appropriate people at Human Resources and where necessary get help through your company’s Employee Assistance Program. Don’t try to solve a problem that is beyond your competency

and expertise. Accept that you can help others realize their potential, but that you cannot change others or mold them in your own image. Even when you feel that you were unsuccessful, use the opportunity to improve your skills by asking yourself what lessons you learned from the experience and how might you apply them next time.

When you approach poor performance as a problem to be solved rather than a battle to be fought, you will have successfully turned a frustrating situation into one that is pregnant with satisfaction, potential, opportunity and reward.

■ **Raphael E. Lapin is a Harvard trained negotiation and communication specialist who trains and consults for large corporations both in the United States and around the world. He can be reached via his company’s website at www.conflict-management.net or directly at relapin@conflict-management.net**