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The Three Things Every Employee Should Know

Performance management starts with the manager. A key component of a manager's job is to ensure as much line-of-sight as possible between the tasks an employee does every day and the success of the business.

Employees should always know:

- Their responsibilities and priorities.
- Why doing their job well matters.
- How their work contributes to the success of the organization.

When employees cannot answer those questions, the damage adds up quickly. Ambiguity drives disengagement, stress, and turnover. If people cannot see how their work matters, they will struggle to stay connected to it.

Performance Reviews Are a Clarity Opportunity

Performance check-ins and reviews can reduce confusion if managers use them as a two-way conversation. When managers don't focus on the 'look forward' part of the review they will constantly be behind and miss an opportunity to discuss expectations. It is also recommended that if managers follow the 80/20 rule where the employee speaks 80% of the time during formal performance reviews. This will help reveal where there are any misalignments.

It's important for managers to define success in terms that leave little room for guesswork for their employees. An important aspect of any manager and employee relationship is being able to articulate expectations by defining success metrics in terms of tangible data that is clear and not ambiguous. Managers can test for shared understanding, by simply asking employees to explain goals back in plain

language, rather than in corporate jargon. That simple step helps managers confirm that expectations are clear, practical, and most importantly, understood.

It's also important to understand that ambiguity thrives when responsibilities are implied instead of stated. For that reason, managers should clearly define core responsibilities, expected outcomes, and any changes in priorities. They should also explain decision-making boundaries so employees know what they can decide, what they can influence, and what they should escalate.

A strong performance review should answer three questions:

- What exactly am I responsible for?
- What decisions am I empowered to make?
- How does my work support my team, program, and the mission?

When managers answer those questions directly, they reduce stress, improve productivity, and strengthen alignment.

Effective Performance Improvement Plans

Performance improvement plans (PIPs) have gotten a bad rap, primarily because they haven't been used in the right way. Previously in the *Wall Street Journal* it stated that PIPs are "the most hated way of firing someone" and that they are "dreaded" by managers and workers. The article cited "not ideal" PIPs, including one directing the employee to "raise the bar" as its sole recommendation.

When PIPs are drafted properly, it notifies an employee that work performance isn't meeting expectations and gives that employee time to step up performance. PIPs also provide documentation that the worker was warned

about their performance. PIPs can salvage good employees and if structured properly, they can provide employees with a chance to improve. Below are the eight points for how to implement PIPs appropriately.

Identify specific incidents in which performance has fallen short.

General terms such as *be open-minded* or *has a bad attitude* are not helpful. Instead, focus on specific examples such as *a list of dates the employee was late for work or failing to meet sales targets in March, April and May*. Explain as much as you can in detail: Don't just summarize, try to list measurable examples of poor performance.

Specify instructions for how performance must improve.

Guidance for improvement must be tied to specific examples of shortcomings. Examples would be: *No more unexcused absences* or *Must meet monthly sales targets*. The goals must be reasonable and attainable, because PIPs can only be focused on things the employee can control.

Provide a reasonable time frame to improve performance.

PIPs need to be a minimum of 30 days, but 60 or 90 days is more customary. Don't put someone on a three-year PIP although give the employee enough time to improve.

Give notice of the consequences for failing to improve.

Ordinarily, the consequences of not improving are termination of employment or demotion. Whatever it is, it has to be stated. The goal is to be fair and transparent to the employee. There should also be language in the PIP that states that management reserves the right to terminate the PIP sooner if the worker is not improving. Give yourself that flexibility. It should also be clear that the PIP does not affect at-will employment.

Reserve the right to extend the PIP period.

Sometimes, employees show promise but are not quite there yet. To reward them, you can extend the PIP period to see if they improve satisfactorily. In addition, you should extend the PIP if the employee goes on a leave of absence or takes a significant amount of time off.

Have the employee sign to confirm receipt of the PIP.

To gain buy-in, it is important to have the employee acknowledge receipt of the PIP. The best-case scenario is that the employee accepts the PIP and tries hard to improve. Please note that the PIP is no less valid if the employee refuses to sign it. It's just as binding as if they signed it.

Don't allow the employee to block the PIP.

If the employee attempts to block the PIP by filing a workers' compensation claim, going on medical leave, or complaining about harassment or labor violations, proceed with the PIP. If you have evidence of misconduct or poor performance before the PIP, a retaliation claim will be weak. If you fail to give the PIP on account of blocking conduct, you will lose the ability to issue effective PIPs in the future.

Provide regular check-ins.

Regular feedback from the manager during the PIP period is important. Check-ins should be scheduled weekly or biweekly and a written summary of each meeting should be given to the employee. If the manager cannot commit to that check-in and feedback process, don't start the PIP because it will look like you're just papering the file to get rid of the person.

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