

# LEADING PEOPLE | THROUGH DISASTERS

## Manager Aids to Helping Employees through the Trauma of Disaster\*

**Introduction.** Managers and supervisors who are most familiar with the work habits and personalities of their employees can play a critical role in preventing problems, detecting difficulties and motivating people to accept outside help. HR also can help by recommending outside resources, many of which may be company-paid.

**Specific steps to take if performance declines.** Managers and supervisors need to take some specific steps if an employee's performance begins to decline. Intervene quickly if performance begins to decline, referring an employee to support professionals such as HR staff, EAP, and/or other behavioral health professionals available to you.

Refer employees to a professional at every step in the problem-solving process, including verbal warnings, written warning, and probation, and document these offers of assistance. *This is different than the normal progressive disciplinary process in that you are offering behavioral health assistance along the way.* Follow up to ensure that employees have met with support professionals; ensure you or HR staff members are advised about employee relations issues. Ensure managers document signs of performance decline and referrals they have made and send a copy to HR.

Documentation is essential to support the problem-solving process and respond to litigation or workers' compensation claims. When documenting, the information must be accurate, factual, and consistent. When documenting behavior, do not refer to hearsay and don't judge and/or diagnose an employee's actions. Contact the behavioral health resource with your performance documentation.

**Signs of performance problems.** The behavioral problems listed below are warning signals that managers need to confront and document:

- 1) **Absenteeism, including:** Unauthorized leave; excessive sick leave Friday and/or Monday absences (could be related to increased alcohol or drug usage); repeated absences of 2 to 4 days; Excessive tardiness, especially on Monday mornings or when returning from lunch (again, may be substance abuse); often leaving work early; peculiar and increasingly improbable excuses for absences; higher absenteeism rate than other employees for colds, flu, gastritis, and so forth (and consequently more claims on health insurance).
- 2) **"On-the-job absenteeism,"** for example: is continually absent from work station more than the job requires; makes frequent trips to water fountain or bathroom; takes long coffee breaks, or is physically ill on job.
- 3) **High accident rate** including accidents on the job or accidents off the job but affecting job performance.
- 4) **Difficulty concentrating**, e.g., work seems to require a greater effort; jobs take more time or hand tremor occurs when concentrating.

- 5) **Confusion** e.g., has difficulty in recalling instructions and details of work assignments; has increasing difficulty in dealing with complex assignments; has difficulty recalling own mistakes.
- 6) **Spasmodic work patterns**, for instance alternate periods of very high and low productivity.
- 7) **Inflexibility—does not change easily.** Your requests for change may present a threat because the employee's control of his or her present job duties and responsibilities allows him or her to hide low job performance. The inability to make routine changes could also indicate a high tension level or another serious problem.
- 8) **Coming or returning to work in an obviously atypical condition**, which may indicate a substance abuse problem.
- 9) **Generally lowered job efficiency:** misses deadlines; makes mistakes due to inattention or poor judgment; wastes more material; makes bad decisions; receives complaints from customers, or has improbable excuses for poor job performance.
- 10) **Poor personal relationships on the job** such as friction in employee relationships, usually resulting in decreased job performance and efficiency.
- 11) **Possible alcoholism or drug addition**, as indicated by overreacting to real or imagined criticism; wide swings in morale; borrows money from coworkers; compiles complaints from coworkers; has unreasonable resentments or begins to avoid associates.

**Guidelines for a meeting with an employee who is having trouble.** If you notice any of the above behaviors, or your employee's performance is declining, intervene quickly to determine the key issue(s).

Meet with your employee in his or her work station or office if privacy is adequate. Come prepared with a clear sense of the job criteria and the facts that you wish to address. Focus on specific job performance issues or behavior, not on vague personality or attitude problems, which can easily be denied. Indicate the effect that the worker's problem is having on you, the workload, and the other workers in your unit.

Hold an unhurried discussion and maintain sensitivity to the employee's feelings and needs. The manner in which you address your employee in this first meeting will be critical in reducing defensiveness and creating a comfortable environment for communication. Listen carefully to what the employee says. Be empathetic. Avoid minimizing what he or she is feeling or saying. Your tone should be calm, supportive, and positive. Continue to gently ask questions and listen until you understand fully the nature of the problem, including how it may relate to the disaster that recently occurred.

Be careful not to over-emotionalize what is said. Communicate the facts and discuss the issues. Do not diagnose the problem; ask the employee to make an appointment with Employee Assistance or other behavioral health providers, or offer to schedule an appointment for him or her. Continue to be supportive but firm in the message that his or her performance must return to a satisfactory level. Remain calm and firm, always bringing the conversation back to specific on-the-job problems, despite your employee's excuses, defensiveness, or hostility.

Avoid any diagnosis or labeling of the employee's problem. Stress that whatever the trouble is, it is the employee's responsibility to do whatever is necessary—for instance, by using a behavioral health provider—to perform adequately. If the problem is personal, for example, family problems, alcohol or drug abuse, stress, or financial worries either directly or indirectly brought on by the

disaster, be particularly sensitive and respectful of the employee's feelings. It is difficult for anyone except a professional counselor to assist in these situations. Reassure your employee that the company wants to help through the EAP or other resource.

Keep an open door and follow up to ensure that the employee meets with a trained counselor, such as the EAP. Emphasize exactly what you expect in order to resolve the problem. Be sure that the employee understands, then get a commitment and monitor it.

Set a definite date—a month from now, perhaps—for your next meeting, at which time you expect marked improvement. End the interview on a positive note, with your expectation that given the resources available, the employee will start to deal with the problem and work productivity will improve.

**First corrective interview.** If the employee's performance continues to deteriorate, conduct another interview and take whatever step in disciplinary action is warranted. Inform the employee that failure to improve job performance will result in further disciplinary action up to and including termination. Conclude with a strong recommendation that the individual use the services of the Employee Assistance Program.

**Second corrective interview.** If deterioration of performance continues, conduct a second corrective interview. Conclude by offering the employee the choice between accepting the services of the Employee Assistance Program or being terminated because of unsatisfactory job performance.

**Termination.** If after the three steps described above the employee does not or will not perform to the position's job performance standards, he or she should be terminated.

Remember, the goal is to balance business continuity with the needs of **all** employees. If employees in a work group can't count on a co-worker to perform that hurts everyone's performance, and creates even more tension when nerves can still be raw from the disaster.

\*Excerpted from Leading People Through Disasters