



# DEALING WITH PROBLEM STAFF

by Peter Quarry, Psychologist

'Dealing with people whose performance is not up to scratch is one of the most difficult issues people in supervisory roles have to face', says psychologist and performance consultant Peter Quarry. 'Often they tend to avoid the problem, wait too long, then come down too heavily', he says.

The answer is to develop a structured approach so you know how to deal with a problem when it arises.

The first time a problem comes up, it may only require a casual comment such as 'I noticed you were late today, try and keep to time'. For a recurring problem, or one that is more serious a more structured, yet informal discussion is warranted. While the discussion should be kept informal, that doesn't mean you shouldn't be prepared.

'Do your homework before you sit down because you have to get your facts right and have evidence. Too many supervisors rush in unprepared', says Quarry. 'What you need to do is have a talk with the staff member and give him or her feedback', he says. This should be specific and detail concrete examples.

'Never use words like "attitude". You should avoid words that describe a personality attribute. They are ambiguous and get the person on the defensive', says Quarry. Instead, you should give examples, describe incidents. This helps the other person focus on the specific issue you are concerned about and shows that you are being fair and have got your facts right.

One of the problems that can arise at this stage is an accusation 'Have you been spying on me?' Quarry suggests the following response: 'No, but I did want to get my facts right. You would want me to get my facts right?'

Having described the incident or behaviour

that's a problem, ask the person if he or she agrees that this is an area of performance that needs attention. If the employee disagrees with you on what actually happened, you may need to give more evidence or examples of the problem, but if the employee basically agrees with the case you presented, you can move on to examining the problem.

'You then need to ask the employee why there has been a problem with performance', says Quarry. 'Some typical causes include: a lack of skills or knowledge; the employee may not have been clear about what was expected; somebody else might not be doing his or her job properly; it could be poor procedures or practices; or the employee might have personal problems at home or be feeling unmotivated', he says.

Once you have determined the cause of the problem you can determine an appropriate solution and agree with the employee on an action plan and review date. In all cases, both parties should leave the discussion with a clear understanding of what has been agreed. (This could include the supervisor accepting responsibility to arrange necessary training or agreeing to speak to another employee.) You may need to go through this cycle more than once to fully resolve the issue.

A final reminder to supervisors: 'Very often', says Quarry, 'one of the major factors affecting a person's performance is the supervisor's behaviour. It may be that he or she has not given clear instructions or not enough feedback, or that the supervisor has been juggling or changing priorities'.

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