

WHY MANAGERS DO NOT RESOLVE PERFORMANCE ISSUES

In attempting to resolve poor performance, managers find themselves in what I call the “Sinking Sand Trap.” The Sinking Sand Trap is an unproductive circle of roles, all of which tend to aggravate a difficult situation. Learning how to recognise these roles, as described below, is the first step in avoiding the “Sinking Sand Trap.”

Enabler

When a manager ignores a performance issue, hoping it will resolve itself, the manager becomes an enabler. As the enabler, the manager shelters the employee from feeling the consequences of the poor performance and, thus, does not provide incentives for the employee to improve. The enabler creates an implicit contract with the employee saying, “Don’t worry, I will take care of you.”

Sufferer

As time progresses, the manager becomes the sufferer when the employee does not improve and the manager’s own performance suffers as a result of the effort spent enabling the employee. The manager may experience negative repercussions, such as scrutiny from senior management and increased conflicts among co-workers. The manager, who believed she or he was only trying to provide support, in turn feels victimised.

The Tormentor

The manager resents being a victim and thus assumes the third role in the Sinking Sand Trap, the tormentor. As the tormentor, the manager looks for opportunities to find fault with the employee in order to remove the employee and/or the problem. The manager may seek support from others, but finds that the previous enabling attempts have cosseted the employee.

The manager often impulsively confronts the employee, perhaps threatening disciplinary action. In response, the employee usually promises to improve. The circle is complete when the manager accepts this promise and moves back into the role of the enabler. The “Sinking Sand Trap: is real and can happen to anyone who manages people.

HOW CAN MANAGERS AVOID THIS TRAP?

By using the supportive confrontation technique.

1. Stage 1 clarify the problem
2. Stage 2 identify the options
3. Stage 3 develop an action plan

Documentation

It is important in early recognition of a performance issue and its resolution to identify a pattern of decline over time. In addition to being aware of the warning signs that may signal a potential problem, you may find it useful to document performance.

Documentation is a useful tool that will help you accomplish the following:

- Focus on noticeable, verifiable facts in a calm, objective manner.
- Identify possible patterns of behaviour.
- Plan when to address your concerns with the employee.
- Prepare for and conduct an effective performance review using the supportive confrontation technique.
- Assist the employee to recognise both the problem and its severity by presenting the work performance decline in a factual, non-judgemental, non-threatening manner.
- Stay focused on job performance, don't get personal.
- Tell the employee how much time he has to achieve this and what kind of disciplinary action will be taken if he does not meet the specified performance criteria within the set period of time. The person concerned is also informed about the possible implications of the disciplinary action.
- Obtain consensus regarding the deadline, performance criteria and disciplinary action, and incorporate this in a written agreement.
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- Continue to monitor the employee's work performance and document improvements or a decline.
- Follow through with normal disciplinary procedures if necessary.