

The four words that nobody ever wants to hear: "We need to talk"

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More often than not, they are also the four words that no one in management wants to say. But failure to do so is one of the main reasons an employment issue turns contentious.

By failing to talk to employees about underperformance you, as the employer, are not only creating more work for yourself in the long run, you are also demonstrating to other staff members, usually hardworking and valuable members of the team, that underperforming is ok. By not disciplining or managing those individuals that are not up to scratch it is often those who are hard working who will pick up the slack, unrewarded. In the worst case scenario, it is those good employees who leave first, leaving your team crippled and management really floundering.

So how and when do you have these conversations?

Early. As soon as the cracks appear, address them. You may discover that there are other external factors influencing the individual and, with a little support, they will get up to speed.

Or you may discover that they are struggling because of internal factors. Maybe they need training or maybe there is a misfit of personalities in the team. Something as simple as not getting on with your line manager can be the difference for some employees. Some need constant re-assurance that they are doing a good job, others don't like being micro-managed. By addressing the managerial relationship and, where possible, moving people between teams or positions can see productivity dramatically increase.

However, should there be no external factor, move towards a process of addressing it straight away. Have an informal conversation and set some guidelines and timelines -but always follow your internal procedure. Failure to do so could see even more issues arising should the matter become contentious.

What now?

Assuming you have set realistic guidelines, check in with your employee and see how they are progressing. Do the boundaries need to be re-set? Have further issues cropped up? If they are still not progressing in a manner which is acceptable, it is time to initiate your formal process.

Many managers fail to keep tabs on the process any longer. Timelines are set and let slip. Markers are made and not kept. This has a two fold effect – 1) the employee slides back into their old ways and 2) the surrounding employees feel even more hard done by.

This crucial next step and how it is run should be a standard internal procedure. Failure to have a procedure that is simple and accessible by all employees is of itself an issue. Employees need to have easy access to all procedures to understand what they can

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expect from the process and management.

But ultimately, it is another hard conversation. You are potentially telling someone that they are no good at their job, that their work is not up to standard, that they are letting the side down. Nobody enjoys these conversations, least of all those managers who generally have good rapport with their staff. But how can you make sure that they happen?

Take and give responsibility

Incentivise all staff. Make poor management a direct influencer on the performance rating of the manager themselves. Give staff the tools to feedback on the performance of those that they report into. Head management should be accountable to those below and so forth. Ask your staff if poor performance is dealt with. If the answer is no, ask them in what ways. Once the areas of concern have been highlighted, call to account not only those who are underperforming, but those who are not dealing with the underperformance.

Ultimately, training managers how to manage and be good leaders will both make these conversations easier and less likely to happen. Invest in your staff, give them the tools and responsibility and the rest should follow. Failing that, you need a procedure. A good one.