



How to Handle Performance Problems: Tips and Guidance for New Managers

Part 8 in a 12-Part Series on Helping First-Time and/or Seasoned, but Untrained, Supervisors and Managers Transition to Effective Leaders

A primary reason good people get de-motivated is the result of having to work side-by-side with those who don't carry their weight, and having the manager tolerate the low performance.

About the Supervisory Basics Article Series

The transition from an individual contributor to a supervisory or managerial role is one of the most critical and difficult career moves.

Representing the largest pool of management talent in most companies, supervisors prove critical to an organization's success. Companies that develop superior leaders in these supervisory positions can execute more effectively than their competition.

This article, *How to Handle Performance Problems: Tips and Guidance for New Managers*, is based on Module #8 from [The Supervisory Basics Series](#), a 12-Part Series on Helping Individual Contributors and Seasoned, But Untrained, Supervisors Transition to Effective Leaders.

The Supervisory Basics Series consists of 12 individual yet linked two-hour modules, delivered in leader-led or eLearning formats, helping managers understand the management behaviors and tactics required to ensure their own and their company's success. More information on The Supervisory Basics Series can be found at the conclusion of this article.



Listen to the Supervisory Basics Podcast Series: *Tips for Managers and HR Professionals on Helping Individual Contributors Transition to Effective Leaders*. [Available on iTunes](#).

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Introduction

Holding employees accountable creates consistent clarity for performance expectations – and is an important element of a motivating work environment. For new managers, the decision to either address or ignore performance problems is a career-defining moment. If poor performance is tolerated, employees learn that:

- It's okay for people to do less than their best.
- It's okay for people to fall short of expectations if they have an excuse.
- It's okay for people not to do what they said they would do.

Under-management of consequences is a fatal trap in which a supervisor or manager finds him or herself in a cycle of limitations, decreasing the quality of work life.

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Confronting Poor Performance

The DESC Intervention Model can help new managers balance the paradoxical nature of holding individuals accountable for performance while simultaneously maintaining positive relationships – balancing task issues and people issues.

When a new manager needs to address a performance problem or situation by asking an employee to change behavior in some way, the employee is usually not happy to hear the negative information and can easily become defensive. Using the DESC Intervention Model (describe the specific situation (D), clarify the effect of the situation (E), state specific future expectations (S) and communicate consequences (C)) focuses performance problem discussions on the behavior and performance standards and avoids judgments about the person.

Step 1: Describe

Knowing that people often react to uncomfortable situations by becoming defensive or angry, the new manager needs to first get the other party to agree to the performance *facts*.

- Specifically state the performance facts—the gap between what is expected and the employee's behavior and performance results.
- Keep it manageable in scope – stick to the current performance issue and don't bring past issues into the conversation.

- Avoid commenting on their motive, intent, or personal characteristics.
- Gain agreement from the employee on the performance facts—the gap between actual and desired performance—before moving on with the discussion.

It is natural to want to explain or justify poor performance, but if the employee attempts to talk about other issues or reasons for the performance gap, avoid that discussion until there is agreement that the performance in question is unacceptable.

Step 2: Effect

It is important to do some homework before having a discussion regarding the impact of present performance. Identifying how the performance problem affects customers, team members, cost, quality and/or other departments is critical to addressing the “So what?” question that gives performance problem discussions legitimacy. It gives performance feedback the credibility and importance that doesn’t get delivered when the “impact” of poor performance is absent. Again, keep it:

- Specific – the measureable impact
- Legitimate – show the clear connection between performance and impact
- Succinct – as concise as possible

Step 3: State

In the “State” stage of the DESC model, the new manager needs to deliver clear future performance expectations using “I” statements. Avoid disguised “I” statements that ascribe motive, intent, or personal characteristics. For example, a good “I” statement is: “The production group is behind their schedule because they are not receiving the quality data they need every day. I need you to ensure that you get the quality data in before 3 p.m. every day.” A bad “I” statement is: “I feel that you lack the initiative necessary for this job—you need to do the job the right way so others can rely on you.”

An effective method for delivering “I” statements is:

- State the impact of the present problem.
- Clearly communicate feelings—when appropriate.
- State expectations.
- Make it crystal clear what is expected in the future and, if necessary, provide a timeline for performance improvement.

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It is always helpful if the action steps for correcting the situation come out of the employee's mouth—not the manager's or supervisor's. This last step makes it more likely that the employee is committed to changing their behavior.

Step 4: Consequences

Clearly spelled-out consequences are a necessary part of the process. Ensure the employee understands his or her responsibility for improvement efforts and clearly explain the consequences for failure to improve or change performance and what the consequences will be for positive improvement or change. One of three things will result from performance problem conversations: The performance will either improve, remain the same, or deteriorate. Your job as a new manager is to increase the odds that the performance will improve. If it doesn't, following up on the consequences is a critical management responsibility. Using idle threats or not following through with consequences will define the supervisor and manager in the rest of the team's eyes.

Through appropriate consequences, managers can either build or erode their power – their ability to influence their group.

Conclusion

Choosing to either ignore or address a performance problem is a watershed moment in a new manager's career. When performance problems arise, new managers can either choose to ignore the problem or deal with it. Ignoring the performance problem creates a poorly performing culture. However, new managers who successfully navigate the challenges of dealing with employees who are performing at an unacceptable level create a culture where good performance is honored while at the same time increasing their respect, credibility and influence.

In the next article (article 9 of our 12-article series), *Handling Difficult Direct Reports*, we'll address effective ways to handle persistent troublemakers and problematic issues such as absenteeism, tardiness, sexual harassment and outside problems.

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If you enjoyed this article, please [visit our website](#) to access other articles in this 12-part series on Supervisory Basics.

Accountability creates consistent clarity for performance expectations – and is an important element of a motivating work environment.

About the Supervisory Basics Series

The [Supervisory Basics Series](#) is based on extensive analysis of the competencies required of transitioning individual contributors and seasoned, but untrained, supervisors. This series provides the knowledge, tools and skills to immediately establish a leadership role and helps participants understand how to avoid the typical traps of new supervisors and managers.

The Supervisory Basics Series helps managers understand the management behaviors and tactics required to ensure their own and their company's success. The result is managers establishing themselves in a legitimate position of power, inspiring superior performance and promoting open, effective communication.

Supervisory Basics also helps beginning managers avoid common new manager traps—lack of clarity in expectations, ineffective communications, not establishing personal power and failing to move from “doer” to leader. Such negative behaviors lead to absenteeism, low morale, and lost productivity and customer loyalty, as well as increased attrition.

The series consists of 12 individual yet linked two-hour modules, delivered in leader-led or eLearning formats. Companies can choose flexible implementation, including an integrated 3-day series, stand-alone sessions, mix and match, and external facilitator or train-the-trainer options. Participants will learn to build credibility, establish legitimate position power, earn personal power, “manage up,” understand legal basics and conduct purposeful workplace discussions.

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