HRInsights

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5 Ways to Manage Poor Workplace Performance Among Remote Workers

Successful business is all about accountability. Each worker's individual contributions build on one another and culminate into something greater, to the benefit of the company and its customers. Conversely, when some individuals struggle with their performance, the entire organization can suffer.

Unfortunately, addressing poor performance isn't always easy. This is especially true amid the COVID-19 pandemic, as remote working often makes accountability more complicated. This article offers five tips to help employers manage poor performance in the workplace, even while everyone is working from home.

1. Address the Problem Quickly

The longer poor performance goes unchecked, the more damage it causes. Strategies such as incidental counseling, frequent check-ins and 360-degree reviews can all be useful for identifying and curtailing poor performance early on. Even if the majority of the workforce is working remotely, it's critical to budget ways to check in and monitor performance in an ongoing manner—particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the margin between success and failure is razor thin.

2. Have Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations aren't easy for many people, managers included. In fact, nearly 20% of top executives struggle to hold others accountable, according to the Harvard Business Review. This is a problem, since issues left unaddressed will almost always worsen over time.

A poorly performing employee isn't likely to improve if left to their own devices—employers need to have tough conversations. This doesn't entail laying into the employee, however. Rather, employers need to thoughtfully explain where they've noticed performance lapses and work candidly with the employee toward improvement.

These conversations should be face-to-face (e.g., a video call) and cover the following:

- Explicit examples of where the employee's performance is waning
- A clearly defined standard that the employee must meet to no longer be considered a poor performer
- Probing questions to identify problem areas, such as:
  - What's different now from when your performance was better?
  - What's not working as well for you, be it a workflow issue, new work arrangement, co-worker relationship or something else?
  - For what and to whom are you accountable?
- An agreed-upon goal and timeline for assessing improvement

The end goal of these conversations should be to correct the problem, not necessarily discipline the employee. For instance, an employer may discover through this process that a workflow is the main hindrance, not an individual.

In other words, migrating to a work-from-home arrangement can create unforeseen problems, which can resemble individual shortcomings. By having tough conversations, employers can figure out the truth and help work toward a solution.

3. Follow Up on Progress

Establishing performance improvement goals is only worthwhile if employees are held to them. A clear goal with measurable standards should've been established during the initial performance conversation with the employee. Employers should follow up about everything that was discussed during that meeting.

The length of time between the initial meeting and follow-up will vary by situation. For instance, if the main problem turned out to be workflow-related—rather than solely about performance—it may take longer to establish a fix, since that solution may necessitate input from many stakeholders. In other cases, such as when an employee is distracted by personal responsibilities, an employer may have quicker turnaround expectations and follow up sooner.

4. Keep a Detailed Record

Employers should document all performance-related issues from the onset. That means as soon as a manager notices dwindling performance, a paper trail should begin. In a remote setting, this would entail collecting emails, chat transcripts and other logs. Doing so will help guide performance improvement by cataloging specific examples for the employee to work on and identifying different time periods to compare performance against.

The record should also include meeting notes to document anything that's discussed during performance meetings, including specific action steps and goals. Employers may consider recording video calls, with employee consent, to keep a more accurate record. Not only will this documentation help employers track performance improvement, it may also be necessary for justifying an employee's termination if they do not improve.

5. Seek Additional Manager Training

Performance issues can often be corrected through swift action. But, if managers are unable to recognize or address poor performance with their direct reports, problems will only continue. Managers may have different blind spots in this regard. Some may not track performance closely enough, while others may speculate as to the cause of the poor performance without actually addressing it.

That's why manager training is so important. Managers should be able to spot when performance is declining and have the resolve to address those situations with employees. This is the only method for getting to the root cause and improving the circumstances. It's not prudent to expect employees to bring up their limited performance on their own.

Speak with AHERN Insurance Brokerage for more workplace guidance, including additional best practices for managers.