

## **EMPLOYEES AREN'T LIGHTBULBS, BUT THEY STILL HAVE TO WANT TO CHANGE**

Counseling and disciplining employees to bring out their best performance is a concept similar to the old joke: “How many Monks does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has to want to change.” In fact, the entire subject of employee counseling and disciplining lends itself well to the light bulb-changing analogy: the same kind of bulb doesn’t fit in every socket; changing some bulbs requires special tools; if you invest more upfront for an energy efficient bulb, they last longer and work more efficiently than the cheap ones; and, just one bad bulb can cause a fuse to blow and cause a blackout of the whole electrical system.

So, how does an employer insure it is getting the most “energy efficiency” from its employees? By investing its resources in actively managing and correcting employee performance problems as they arise.

Employee issues can often be repaired through competent employer coaching before discipline becomes necessary. Coaching and counseling most often follows a collaborative approach: employer and employee identify improvements an employee needs to make and discuss the changes necessary to achieve the employer’s performance expectations. The emphasis in disciplinary action is on notice to the employee of expectations and the consequences of the employee’s failure to perform.

So, the employer’s course of action when counseling or disciplining employees will depend on the nature of the employee’s job position (type of bulb?), the specific performance issue (any special tools needed?) and the culture of your organization (the electrical system). But whether the employer is addressing an employee issue with verbal counseling or applying progressive discipline, there is a basic formula that is essential to success -- employee change.

First, the employer should meet with the employee privately and without interruptions. Providing the employee with undivided attention conveys the employer’s respect for the employee as well as emphasis on the importance of the issue.

The employer must identify the performance standards and goals for the employee. The employer should express the expectations and goals to the employee in clear and measurable terms. The employer should then identify the current employee performance and discuss how it differs from the performance standards, using specific events and objective facts to describe the unacceptable performance or conduct.

It’s very important for the employer representative to keep an open mind and listen attentively to what the employee has to say during the counseling or disciplinary meeting. The employee may not have been aware of or fully understand the employer’s performance expectations; further, the employee may not understand why meeting the employer’s expectations is important to the efficient operation of the workplace.

This is an opportunity for the employer and employee to shoot for a common understanding of the issues and of the circumstances causing the performance issues. The employer and employee should work together to agree on what the performance issues are and create a plan for the solution that will get the employee's performance to the level of the employer's expectations. Of course, this step becomes less significant as the disciplinary process progresses.

The employer should also set a date to revisit the issue and check on the employee's progress, or achievement of, the performance standards. The employer should inform the employee of the consequences of failure to improve and advise the employee of the timeline for improvement -- often "immediately" is the operable word.

Finally, the employer should document the meeting. Outlining the above discussion points provides a good framework for that documentation, and also serves as an outline for any written disciplinary action.

So how do employers avoid the metaphorical black out -- caused by widespread negative morale? By actively managing performance issues as they arise, smart employers foster an environment where employees are confident that everyone, including coworkers and managers, is accountable to achieve the performance expectations of their relative positions.

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