

Employee counselling and performance management

Tony Buon considers the controversial issue of manager involvement in counselling

Historically the term counselling was associated with serious personal problems such as alcohol dependency and marital breakdown¹. In recent years the term has been widely used in management literature to the extent that some writers have suggested that 'managers cannot avoid acting as counsellors'². However, the term is used in a vague way and often this employee 'counselling' bears little relationship to psychotherapy or other forms of professional counselling.

Performance decline

Managing poor performance is an unpleasant and difficult task and managers do not use disciplinary actions as often as they should; many would rather put up with poor performance than conduct a work performance or disciplinary interview. This lack of desire to manage poor performance is of particular concern as there is evidence that work performance intervention may be the most effective and one of the most important management tasks.

If a manager is to manage performance decline, then performance must be explicitly defined. This requires the establishment of performance standards. Without established performance standards it is impossible to measure any decline. If over time the employee's performance drops significantly from the established standards we have work performance decline. It is important to note that this performance decline should be significant and sustained. All employees may have minor deviation in performance over time due to transient environmental factors, workload or scheduling. As well as established standards, it is equally important that deviations can be measured and observed. This requires properly trained managers and clearly defined and agreed procedures. Most importantly, it requires consistent feedback, rewards when standards are achieved or surpassed, and sanctions when they are not met.

Correcting performance decline

What causes performance decline with a previously functioning employee? Work-related factors such as poorly defined goals, lack of training and lack of effective recognition can affect an employee's work performance. Personal factors such as alcohol dependency, family problems or financial worries can cause employees to lower the quality of their work³.

Any diagnosis of the cause of performance decline brings with it the need for action. Appropriate corrective strategies include training, coaching, job

design and various forms of employee 'counselling'. The management response to performance decline must address the underlying cause of the problem. If the cause is work-related, the solution lies within the domain of the manager. But what if this cause is a set of complex and private personal problems? Most authors suggest some form of counselling as the appropriate strategy in these situations.

If the manager discovers that the performance problem is caused by personal problems, they are still left with two major problems:

- in many cases the actual causes of personal problems are extremely difficult to diagnose, even for skilled counsellors
- if a manager diagnoses the cause of a personal problem what are they supposed to do (treat, refer, ignore)? The solution to this dilemma lies in appropriate work performance intervention.

Appropriate intervention

Appropriate work performance intervention rests on the observational skills (of work performance decline) of managers but there is great danger in assuming that they are able or even willing to take on the counselling role. Their job should be to detect a work performance problem at the earliest time, determine if the cause is work related, and if not offer referral for assistance. This should happen only when two conditions are satisfied:

- the problem must be affecting work performance
- the employee must agree to accept assistance.

The manager should not become involved in private matters; their focus must remain on the work performance of the employee. Problems in an employee's private life that do not affect their work performance are not the business of the employer⁴.

There are then three essential requirements for a manager who wishes to conduct an appropriate work performance interview:

The manager should use interviewing techniques to establish if the problem is work related. For example, lack of standards or a lack of training. In these cases the manager should intervene directly.

If the employee's work performance problem is due to personal issues, the manager should keep the focus of their concern on the employee's work performance only. It is important to offer all employees free, independent, professional, voluntary and confidential assistance. The manager must not attempt to 'counsel' the employee about personal problems under any circumstances.

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Employee counselling

When an employee's personal problems affect their performance or that of the work group, the manager must intervene; referral to professional counselling may be appropriate. Counselling may be offered internally by a professional counsellor or externally, perhaps by an EAP. Some organisations try to get around this by using local community services from a company referral directory. However this requires the manager to diagnose the employee's problems (eg is this employee drug dependent or do they have marital problems?), something they are neither qualified nor entitled to do. In addition trying to keep such a directory updated is difficult and time consuming.

It is easy to see how much valuable time is wasted by managers trying to deal with something they are neither trained for, nor competent to handle. The legal ramifications of the manager's action can also be called into question, as the manager has a duty of care to prevent damage to the employee resulting from their 'counselling'.

Duty of care

Duty of care is a legal concept which states that a person who suffers harm as a result of the actions (or inactions) of someone who has a duty of care towards them may be able to take action against that person (and their employer) for negligence.

If a manager is engaged in an activity that any reasonable person would realise calls for care to prevent damage to an employee, then that manager has a duty of care to the employee who may rely on their claimed knowledge and skill. It could be suggested that if a high level of skill is required (such as with counselling), then a greater duty of care is demanded.

Therefore in the case where an employee follows the advice of the manager and this results in the employee suffering harm or loss as a consequence, the manager and the organisation could face legal action. Even if the manager is strictly within the legal requirements for duty of care, they may still be outside the ethical standard of duty of care. It is worth noting that professional counsellors carry malpractice insurance whereas managers (and human resource professionals) usually do not. A further problem is that the manager loses focus. As the manager is getting involved in the employee's complex personal problem, they are not doing the job they are paid for. Their focus moves from the performance decline to the employee's private life.

At this stage it is easy to see that the manager who has entered into the murky world of the employee's pathology may not want to take action against the employee as they feel sorry for them.

This is not to say that the manager should not be concerned about their employees. On the contrary, they must be concerned, but it should be limited.

EAP managerial referral

A more appropriate technique is the formal (but grossly underused) EAP process that allows the manager to manage performance decline as well as express concern for the whole employee.

A simple model of EAP operation is as follows:

1. The employer may offer the use of a confidential counselling service when there is a performance problem, but the decision about using it remains with the employee.
2. The basis of managerial intervention is the recognition that employees have a responsibility to perform adequately on the job, and managers have the responsibility, and should have the training and support, to encourage and guide them to do so.
3. The continued monitoring of work performance is the only method of assessment open to the manager. When performance is below established standards, the manager should discuss the facts with the employee and assist that person to return to an acceptable standard within the framework of the organisation's disciplinary policy.
4. The counselling referral is made strictly on the basis of declining work performance, thus freeing managers from trying to diagnose personal issues.

Summary

Not all performance problems are caused by personal ones, and many factors affect performance decline. Work-related causes are the responsibility of the manager. Performance management requires clear standards and managers to be trained in interview techniques. It does not require managers to be taught counselling or pseudo-psychological skills. The EAP model provides managers with a framework for appropriate work performance intervention. It allows managers to show concern without getting involved in employee 'counselling' or losing focus on the performance decline. The primary role of the manager remains the management of employees and their work performance. ■

References

- 1 Novarra V. Can a manager be a counsellor? *Personnel Management*. June 1986;48-50.
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- 3 Buon T, Compton B. The development of alcohol and other drug programs in the workplace. *Journal of Occupational Health and Safety – Australia and New Zealand*. 1990;6:265-77.
- 4 Buon T. Employee counselling and performance management. *Journal of Occupational Health and Safety – Australia and New Zealand*. 1992;8(1):59-67.