



MIIA - Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

Counseling Services / Information & Referrals / Management Consultations
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Motivational Management Series VII

Inter-performance: Repairing and Improving Interpersonal Performance in the Workplace

“When complaints are freely heard, deeply considered, and speedily reformed, then is the utmost bound of civil liberty attained that wise men look for.” John Milton, 1608-1674

Workplaces are people environments. The degree to which good work gets done depends, in large measure, on how well workplace relationships function. There is a direct correlation between high quality teamwork and high production. Conversely, poor work relationships -- where trust, respect, and cooperation are low -- result in less efficient, reduced quality output. In this volume of four articles

we take a look at inter-performance, the ways in which person-to-person interactions affect quality of life and quality of work. The first piece addresses how to deal with chronic complainers. The second piece takes a look at negatively charged employees -- from those individuals who are low and depressed to those who are provocative and confrontational. The third article examines and suggests ways to

reduce conflict, improve cooperation, and turn around poor communication. Finally, we broach the difficult terrain of the supervisor, sandwiched between the needs of his or her employees and the requirements of senior management.



“Now, 10 years later, the person who talked and complained is still talking and complaining and still remains in the same position. The person who took the initiative and found solutions has been promoted several times.” --Catherine Pulsifer

Let's start with the complaining employee. He or she might complain about many things: workload, workplace conditions, lack of support and recognition, lack of fairness around doing more work than others, other employees who “bother” him or her, and so on. Complainers often try to get others to jump on the complaint bandwagon, thus engendering an increasing cloud of negativity in the workplace.

While some complaints might be seen as petty, others are real grievances. As a rule of thumb, where complaints may be settled informally do so, but there should be procedures in place to handle serious grievances in a timely and fair manner, as well as confidentially and sympathetically.

Although it is quite a challenge, complainers often do have something to share about their experience that can be useful to supervisors and managers. So, when dealing with a complainer, it pays to start with your own positive attitude: “What can I learn from this complainer that will help me improve my department?” Writer Elaine Varelas suggests that the majority of employees don’t like to complain, and have to “get up the nerve” if something is really bothering them.

ENGAGE the complainer and elicit his/her difficult experience. Engaging starts with your expression of interest: “I understand you are struggling with something and I’d like to understand what it is, and work with you to improve your experience. Please tell me what’s going on.”

EXAMINE the problem in more detail. Like a good journalist, a supervisor requires the ‘what,’ ‘why,’ ‘where,’ ‘when’ and ‘how’ of something, in order to find all the factors that directly or indirectly support the problem’s continuance. Does the problem belong to the employee who just needs to vent, or who complains about typical and expectable workplace happenings? Or does the employee voice, for a larger group of others, a major problem?

Acquaint yourself with what the employee has already tried to do to remedy the situation. If he or she has done nothing (other than complain), it will become obvious. Assess whether it is within the employee’s locus of power to behave proactively to improve the situation. If the employee has sincerely tried to correct relationships with coworkers, or to address other work issues proactively, then it may indicate a need for you to step in at an administrative level, or to involve your Human Resources department.

If you assess that the employee is bringing personal problems to work, he or she may need a referral to your EAP program rather than using the workplace as a place to unload emotionally.

EXPECT every complainer to work hard on behalf of a solution. The old adage that “if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem,” has withstood the test of time. Chronic complainers who understand that you expect them to help correct what they don’t like will either behave more proactively or stop complaining.

EXPLAIN to the employee the series of solution-focused steps that he or she will take, as well as what you will do to improve the situation. When done in collaboration with the complainer, the draft for problem-solving will include an improvement plan, a timeline for checking in, and a picture of how resolution looks.

It is always important for you to determine if the problem requires more muscle than you can exert within your role. If so, consult upper management, and collaborate with HR to determine the best group of individuals to weigh in on resolving the issue, especially if formal procedures apply.

“If you don’t like something change it. If you can’t change it, change your attitude. Don’t complain.” --Maya Angelou



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