



Guide to Employee Communications Counseling and Corrective Discipline for Supervisors



**PALM BEACH STATE
COLLEGE**

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PART I: INTRODUCTION

As an educational institution, we are required to establish standards of performance for our students. These standards enable students to achieve their academic goals. The same principle applies to our employees. Performance expectations are outlined during the interview process, within the job description, during the performance evaluation and through day to day conversations between the supervisor and employee. When there are concerns about behavior or meeting expectations, timely communication with employees is imperative to their success. This will enable issues to be resolved at the earliest possible opportunity.

Equally important is the acknowledgement of performance that is commendable. Recognition of good performance is directly linked to employee motivation and enhanced job performance. The time and effort taken to give performance feedback is an investment in our employees, which like any other investment, provides a benefit. Benefits provided to the supervisor and employee may include:

Benefits to the Supervisor

Creation of an empowered work environment thereby reducing the need to be overly involved in everything that goes on.

Confidence that employees will accomplish needed tasks as they become aware of the expectations and what is important.

Development of cooperative relationships.
Reducing time-consuming misunderstandings among staff.

Benefits to the Employee

Develop feelings of empowerment where there is trust in the employee's ability to make day-to-day decisions.

Provides feedback that acknowledges accomplishments, identifies areas for improvement, and clarifies expectations.

Opportunities to learn new skills or improve existing skills.

Being able to effectively praise an employee, communicate concerns or clarify expectations could be the most challenging duty supervisors encounter. This guide will provide supervisors with the tools and guidance to assist in successfully accomplishing this task.

PART II: COMMENDATIONS

Positive reinforcement of employee behavior or performance that supervisors want repeated encourages the behavior or performance to continue. Communicating praise and acknowledging employee efforts reinforces the expected behavior or performance and provides a positive influence. Recognition is best received when it is timely, specific, sincere and factual. Personal recognition, a simple thank you for a job well done, is highly motivational for many employees.

Employee recognition and positive feedback are powerful tools for employee motivation. Employees place a high level of importance on knowing that they are working for a supervisor who cares about them and says so, often. Positive reinforcement acknowledges specific behaviors with positive feedback, such as a smile, praise or reward.

In an effort to support employee recognition and motivation, two forms have been created to document commendable behavior or performance to an employee's personnel file. Supervisors may choose to use either form, depending on the commendable action they wish to acknowledge and the method of recognition their employee prefers. The form of recognition may be presented privately during a one-to-one meeting, or publicly in a creative way within the department. Either method is acceptable keeping in mind that whichever method is selected should be comfortably received by the employee.

"Commendable Action" Form

The Commendable Action Form is a formal memo developed in order for supervisors to provide written notification to employees who perform tasks exceptionally well or go above and beyond to provide a service to others. This form may be preferred by those employees who are modest and prefer non-public methods of recognition. The completed form is provided to the employee and a copy is then forwarded to Human Resources to be placed in the employee's formal personnel file.



"Thanks a Million" Form

The "Thanks a Million" form is designed to be used for those employees who may prefer an innovative means of recognition for exceptional performance or behavior. Such employees are not embarrassed by public recognition. The completed form is provided to the employee and a copy is then forwarded to Human Resources to be placed in the employee's formal personnel file.

Steps for providing positive feedback:

Do it now. Positive feedback is too important to let slide. Say something right away.

Make it public. While negative feedback should be given privately, positive feedback should be given publicly. Do it in front of as large a group as appropriate.

Be specific. Do not just say, "Good job, Sally." Instead, say something like "Sally, that new procedure you developed for routing student calls has really improved our customer satisfaction. Thanks for coming up with it."

Make a big deal out of it. You do not want to assemble the entire company every time you give positive feedback, but do as much ceremony as the action warrants.

Consider the receiver. It is important to consider the feeling of the person receiving the recognition. For a very shy person, thanking him in front of workgroup is probably most appropriate. For another person, you might hang a banner, balloons, and streamers in the department area.

Do it often. Do not wait for the big successes. Celebrate the small ones too.

Do it evenly. Big successes need big recognition; small successes need smaller recognition. If you throw a party for every small success, you diminish its effect for a big success.

Be sincere. Do not praise someone for coming in on time. Do not congratulate someone for just doing his or her job. People will see right through you. Really mean it when you give positive feedback.

PART III: CORRECTIVE DISCIPLINE

Traditionally corrective discipline is viewed as something progressive in nature. As instances of unacceptable behavior or poor performance occur the level or degree of discipline increases.

Verbal

discussion about the issue and expectations should occur first, followed by written action if the issue

continues. Ultimately, termination can then be considered after the employee has been made aware of the expectations and has been adequately warned of the consequences for not fulfilling those expectations. This process works for most employee issues. However, there are occasions where the facts and

circumstances of an incident warrant varying levels of disciplinary action up to and including termination of employment. There are four main factors considered when determining the appropriate level of disciplinary action:

1. Seriousness of the offense.
2. Repetition or duration of the offense.
3. Existence of any prior offenses and disciplinary action.

Employee response to previous disciplinary actions and current impending disciplinary actions.

Flexibility in the corrective discipline process allows action to be taken based on the circumstances, keeping consistency and fairness in mind. The corrective discipline process described within this guide allows for flexibility so that appropriate corrective action can be taken based on the seriousness of the incident in question. In addition, the risk for employment related legal issues such as claims of discrimination or unfair employment practices from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the Florida Human Rights Commission (FHRC), and the risks of all law suits decrease if the College is able to show in writing that the expectations were communicated to the employee and that employee was previously warned about the consequences for not meeting those expectations.

PART IV: EFFECTIVE COUNSELING

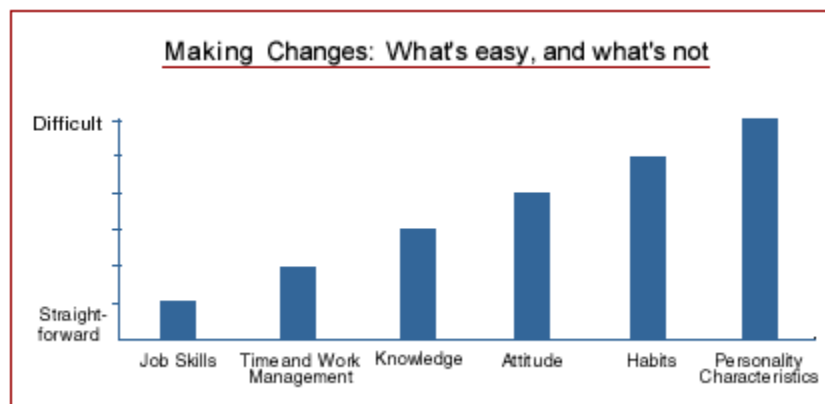
John arrives to work thirty minutes late almost every day of the week; Sue consistently has problems providing you with needed program information in a timely and professional manner; Jean has had several conversations with co-workers and students where he has become aggressive, loud and irate. These are all issues that manager's face. In order for a change in behavior or performance to occur, the issues need to be addressed appropriately. There are three key points to consider when preparing for and delivering an employee counseling session:

- Clearly identify performance and/or behavior concerns
- Establish expectations, improvement plan and communicate consequences
- Obtain a commitment toward improvement

Identify performance and/or behavior concerns

Often performance concerns are easy to identify. It is clear that the minimum standards are not being met as the work may not be done correctly or on time. However, behavior concerns are harder to identify and therefore harder to manage.

Such issues can include insubordination or inappropriate workplace behavior. Most often attendance issues can impair one's performance and may be caused due to behavior issues. All of these issues can be addressed; some may be easier to deal with than others. As the table below shows, issues regarding job skills are often easier to change than personality or behavior issues.



Harvard Manage Mentor: Giving and Receiving Feedback

Concerns can be identified when the supervisor understands the reasons behind the performance or behavior deficiency. The following are a list of questions to review before the counseling session when evaluating concerns:

- **Have the expectations of the job been clearly defined?**
- **Does the employee have the information, skills or resources needed to perform the work?**
- **Is there something or someone keeping the employee from performing the work?**
- **How does the performance or behavior exhibited differ from what you would like to see?**
- **Are others adversely affected by the performance or behavior?**
(i.e. co-workers, students, other departments)
- **Is the information regarding the performance or behavior issue witnessed by the supervisor, or received from parties or witnesses directly involved in this issue? (avoid third party comments, opinions or hearsay in your evaluation of the issue)**
- **Is the employee motivated to perform the work?**
- **What does the employee currently say or do that you want him or her to continue?**



When concerns catch your attention they can often be a result of unsatisfactory performance. Observe your employee; review the concern in detail in order to focus on the issue. It is important to clearly identify and understand the concern in order to establish specific and relative expectations and a plan for improvement.

Establish expectations, improvement plan and consequences

Once a concern is presented, the supervisor needs to clarify and communicate the expectations and actions that need to be taken so a change in performance or behavior will be made. Just as the concern itself needs to be clearly defined, the expectations and improvement plan need to be equally specific.

Obtain a commitment toward improvement

Employees are responsible for meeting the expectations, and they alone will need to decide if they will take the steps needed to accomplish that task. Supervisors need to support employees in this process by assessing the degree of dedication from employees and obtaining a commitment toward improvement. This requires discussion of the issue, agreement on the plan of improvement, documented commitment and scheduled follow up.

Consult the Office of Human Resources prior to proceeding with the counseling session, especially if employee performance or behavior appears to be in violation of college policy.

Conducting the Corrective Discipline or Counseling Session

The following steps will assist supervisors in conducting the corrective discipline or counseling session, keeping the three key points described before in mind.

1. Evaluate the situation before the session
2. State an objective
3. State a desired change
4. Allow a response
5. Discuss solutions
6. Agree
7. Write it up
8. Follow-up

Steps for Conducting the Counseling Session

Evaluate the situation before the counseling session.

Using the questions provided on page five of this document, fully evaluate the situation prior to establishing a meeting time with your employee to conduct the counseling session. Either define the problem as a performance (inability to demonstrate mastery of skills/tasks) or behavior issue (creates an environment that disrupts the workplace). This will help to clarify the details about the issue and determine the best method for proceeding.

If the issue is recurring and no improvement has been made thus far, discuss the situation with the Office of Human Resources prior to conducting the counseling session. (see “Using the Counseling Forms for Verbal and Written Counseling”). Guidance can then be provided regarding appropriate documentation and consequences if the expectations for improvement are not met by the employee.

State an objective

When setting a time to meet with the employee let the employee know what the meeting will be about. Hold the meeting in a private place free from interruptions. At the beginning of the counseling session, restate the reason for the meeting. Provide background about the problem and discuss that the purpose of the meeting is to discuss the issue, develop a plan to deal with the issue and obtain commitment from the employee toward improvement.

State a desired change

As the supervisor, it is important to make it very clear how the desired behavior or performance should be different from the past. Specific examples should be used to present and discuss the issue. State the level of performance or behavior expected and that it must be performed on a consistent basis. Acknowledge strengths of the employee but also identify areas where improvement is needed.

Allow a response

It is important to ask the employee’s opinion about the problem, specifically what the employee believes to be causing the problem. The employee should not be able to move into a mode of denial. This is a common response and when it occurs it can be difficult to regain focus on the issue being discussed. As a supervisor, avoid blame and treat the employee with respect while resisting the temptation to be drawn off topic. Allow the employee to discuss concerns but be sure to bring the conversation back to the main issue being discussed.

Discuss solutions

The employee should be asked to suggest alternatives to dealing with the issue. The supervisor should also provide input at this stage. Identification of standards upon which the performance or behavior change will be measured is essential. Establish, discuss and review reasonable and attainable short and long range goals and timetables for accomplishing this change. This should be documented within the “Performance Improvement Plan” in a specific but plain and simple written manner.

It is important that the employee take ownership of the issue and that responsibility is not shifted back to the supervisor. Clarify to the employee that they are responsible for meeting the expectations. As their supervisor you will support them in this effort however it is ultimately their responsibility to take the necessary action to improve.

Agree on Action to be Taken

This is an important part of the counseling session that cannot be missed. The supervisor and employee need to come to an agreement regarding the issue and steps needed to improve.

The employee should verbally and in writing acknowledge the issue and provide a written understanding and commitment to the plan for improvement. This can be done during the conversation and by obtaining the employee's signature on the counseling form and/or Performance Improvement Plan. The supervisor also needs to sign the documentation. Even the most skilled supervisors encounter situations where the employee may disagree with the issues presented and refuse to sign the counseling documents. When this occurs the phrase "employee refused to sign" should be written in the employee signature field and the document should be signed by the supervisor. The refusal to sign the documentation does not negate the employee's responsibility to improve the behavior or performance as discussed.

Write it up

The issue discussed and resolution agreed upon need to be documented. Either the verbal warning or written warning form may be used for this purpose depending on the history of documentation and severity of the issue. A "Performance Improvement Plan" may also be included if necessary. Any agreed upon expectations or improvement plans should be detailed and include periodic date specific status updates. Consequences for not being able to meet the expectations need to be documented. This may include further disciplinary action up to and including termination. Discuss these options with the Office of Human Resources prior to the counseling session.

Follow up

Following up with the employee on the agreed upon dates is essential. Progress should be discussed as well as recurring concerns. Praise should be provided if the objectives of the plan have been met.

However, if the employee has not been able to accomplish the objectives the supervisor should be honest with the employee advising the employee of the need to comply or more serious action may be taken.

Using the Counseling Forms

Documentation of Verbal Counseling (*Verbal Warning*)

A verbal or oral warning is the least severe form of discipline. However minor the issue, it is important to document the discussion to bring awareness of the need for change to the employee and in case future incidents occur. The verbal counseling form, officially entitled “Documentation of Verbal Counseling”, can be used for this purpose. The same standards and steps outlined within this guide apply whether conducting a verbal or written counseling session. Once the issue is discussed with the employee this form should be completed by the supervisor and retained with in the supervisor’s employee file in order to document and maintain a history of the conversation. Documentation of verbal counseling sessions is not retained within the official personnel file.

Notice of Corrective Action (*Written Warning*)

Written warnings, officially entitled “Notice of Corrective Action”, should be used for issues that are repetitive in nature (discussed verbally in the past) or serious incidents requiring a severe form of disciplinary action. Prior to conducting the counseling session where a written warning will be presented to the employee, the issue and draft of the written counseling form needs to be discussed with the Office of Human Resources. Documentation of past incidents and well developed improvement plans will determine the appropriate level of disciplinary action to be taken and communicated as a consequence to the employee if they are unable to meet the expected goals and objectives. Once the counseling session is conducted and the written warning form is completed and signed, the original document is forwarded to the Office of Human Resources and placed in the employee’s official personnel file.

If a severe incident occurs that is a blatant violation of College Policy contact the Office of Human Resources immediately. Provide all documentation related to past issues discussed with the employee and specific information relative to the current incident. Disciplinary action may include suspension or termination based on the severity of the situation.

Performance Improvement Plan

A “Performance Improvement Plan” should be used as a follow up to the verbal warning or attached to the official written warning to document the agreed upon plan for improvement. Not every incident discussed verbally or documented in writing may require a “Performance Improvement Plan”, especially for single incidents where the expectations and actions needed to be taken by the employee can be well documented within the verbal or written counseling forms. This form can also be used as an attachment to the probationary or annual Performance Appraisal. Specific yet plain and simple language should be used to outline the areas of concerns, specific actions to be taken and expected results. The agreed upon evaluation date should be documented on this form and status updates should be provided when the follow-up dates approach.

PART V: SUMMARY

All Supervisors are responsible for managing the performance of the staff within their departments. The unique qualities each employee brings to the workplace can create a positive environment as well as a challenge. The principles outlined within this guide will assist supervisors in managing their staff toward improved performance. Those principles are summarized as follows:

Steps for providing positive feedback:

1. Do it now.
2. Make it public.
3. Be specific.
4. Make a big deal out of it.
5. Consider the receiver.
6. Do it often.
7. Do it evenly
8. Be sincere.

The four main factors considered when determining the appropriate level of disciplinary action:

1. Seriousness of the offense.
2. Repetition or duration of the offense.
3. Existence of any prior offenses and disciplinary action.
4. Employee response to previous disciplinary actions and current impending disciplinary actions.

The key points to consider when preparing for and delivering an employee counseling session and the steps to conducting the counseling session are:

1. Evaluate the situation before the session
2. State an objective
3. State a desired change
4. Allow a response
5. Discuss solutions
6. Agree
7. Write it up
8. Get a commitment
9. Follow-up

Although employee issues may be similar, each instance has unique attributes such as behaviors, performance and personality of the employee. These attributes need to be considered as a whole in order to determine the best course of action to be taken to improve performance and morale. When dealing with employee issues, do not hesitate to contact the Office of Human Resources for guidance, especially if there is a violation of college policy.

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Resources

Commendable Action Form

<http://intranet.palmbeachstate.edu/hr/Documents/counseling/commendableaction.doc>

Thanks A Million

<http://intranet.palmbeachstate.edu/hr/Documents/counseling/thanksamillion.doc>

Notice of Corrective Action

<http://intranet.palmbeachstate.edu/hr/Documents/counseling/correctiveaction.doc>

Performance Improvement Plan

<http://intranet.palmbeachstate.edu/hr/Documents/counseling/performanceimprovementplan.doc>