

TIPS ON IMPROVING JOB PERFORMANCE

Providing feedback is an ongoing process, much like hiking through unknown terrain, checking your map and compass, to ensure you're going in the right direction, guiding you back on track when you go off course and helping you eventually get to your destination. This type of guidance is also essential in letting people know where they are and where to go next, in terms of expectations – yours, theirs and the organizations.

Withholding feedback is like sending people out, in unknown terrain, without a map and compass. Let's face it; today's Forest Service is a fast paced, constantly changing, very demanding workplace. It's too easy to take a wrong turn, get terribly off track and end up in disaster. Consistent feedback is an essential tool for letting people know when things are moving in the right direction or redirecting them back on the trail, when they're off course.

Supervisors forget to give positive feedback, because they think people already know when they're on the right track, but many people aren't certain unless you tell them. Providing positive feedback allows employees to know, without guessing, that the decisions and choices they've been making are right and that you notice them.

On the flip side, supervisors often shy away from giving corrective or negative feedback for fear of an emotional response or that it will harm relationships. In reality, delaying or withholding corrective feedback will do much more harm in the long run. It merely builds up resentment in the supervisor, doesn't let the employee know that "things" aren't working right, doesn't give the employee the opportunity to improve and may blow apart the organization, when the supervisor's silence tells the other employees that these types of work efforts or unacceptable behavior is really okay!!!

Here are some suggested steps to conducting effective "course correction" conversations:

1) Start the conversation stating something the employee does well. This will help the employee be more open to hearing about where improvement is needed or if there is no improvement needed, it helps the employee know that they are headed in the right direction.

2) Describe the problem (e.g., performance issue) clearly and in a non-threatening way. Talk about the specific behavior and refrain from discussing personality traits. Discuss what the person did and not who the person is. Always remain positive explaining that you will be an active partner in correcting the situation.

3) Ask for the employee's help in solving the problem. Mutually discuss alternative solutions and mutually agree on actions to be taken to solve the problem. Try to use the employee's solution where possible. When the employee's ideas are part of the solution, he/she will be more committed to making it work.

4) Provide resources to help. In some instances, there's an easy remedy to the situation. Possibly a better process/procedure is needed to help the employee become more efficient. Alternatively, the employee may need some additional training or a class to develop a certain skill.

5) Set a specific action plan with follow up dates. Ask questions to make sure the employee understands what is expected. Then develop an action plan that specifies performance expectations and the date for completion. (E.g. the first draft of the PowerPoint presentation should be completed in one week.) You should ensure that there are checkpoints along the way so that there's an opportunity for changing course if necessary.

6) End on a positive note. It is important to communicate to the employee that you are confident he/she can solve this problem and make a positive contribution to the organization.

7) Follow up and recognize improvement. Remember to hold the follow up meeting when you initially specified. Recognize any improvement and continue to coach the person in sustaining this improvement. If improvement has not occurred, then move to the disciplinary process.

Although these steps cannot guarantee improved performance, they are a start in the process. Improving employee performance can be a win-win for everyone. The employee wins by learning what is needed to enhance performance, thereby changing behavior and becoming a more productive member of the organization. The manager wins by counseling a person to achieve desired behavior thereby resulting in a more productive and satisfied employee. Lastly, the organization wins by retaining motivated employees who understand their role and the roles of others in contributing to the goals and culture of the organization.