

PAYROLL & HUMAN RESOURCES

Slow action weakens manager authority

By CAROLYN COHEN

During the course of most financial professionals' careers, they're likely going to find themselves in a management role, whether it's running a small practice, team, department or major corporation.

Managing people is one of the key skills required for success and an important part of it is knowing how to guide people to do their jobs in a manner that best helps the manager and the organization. There are two sides to that role: encouraging and rewarding good performance and discouraging poor performance through discipline and, if necessary, termination.

Every aspect of good performance — whether it is above average work, meeting deadlines, respecting co-workers and dressing professionally — is mirrored by negative counterparts. Poor performance demanding correction can be subtle or blatant, but effective management requires confronting and correcting it.

Many managers are at a disadvantage because they shy away from dealing with performance problems. Why? A major reason is that managers, like most people, prefer to be liked and they're afraid that if they say anything negative they won't be popular, either with the person criticized or other members of the team.

Another reason is that managers often don't know how to deliver negative feedback effectively. Certainly, in the accounting profession, there is little training on people management. And it's not something that comes to most people instinctively; effective management is a learned skill.

So rather than do something wrong, many people prefer to ignore problems and hope that they'll resolve themselves. But a performance problem almost never resolves itself. And the longer it festers, the harder it is to resolve.

It's important to remember that the earlier a problem is confronted, the easier it can be to deal with and then move on. For one thing, it can be dealt with on a much more casual basis, perhaps with as little as a quick comment during a conversation.

If a manager doesn't deal with inappropriate behaviour early on, it can send an unspoken message to the employee that what is going on is acceptable, whether it is shoddy work habits, inappropriate attire, late arrival or any other workplace problem.

That puts the manager at a disadvantage if the issue is brought up later because the employee will say, "I've been doing this for



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months. Why didn't you say anything before? What has changed?"

So, the longer a manager waits, the more likely it is that he or she will have a bigger problem, because the initial problem has become habitual.

Just as importantly, what message is allowing unprofessional or unproductive behaviour to occur sending to other staff? It can indicate that the manager is not a leader who takes action, that people can get away with things, and that below average performance and unacceptable behaviour

methods.

Typically, the pattern follows this path: first a well-documented verbal warning, followed by a written warning and then, if necessary, suspension and/or termination.

A positive aspect to establishing a progressive discipline structure is that employees know what to expect every step of the way. However, having a discipline process in place doesn't let the manager off the hook about being clear about what should happen next, in terms of changes in behav-

has been told their auditing knowledge is unacceptable. What can he or she be reasonably expected to do immediately, especially without help from the firm?

To turn performance around, the firm has to make an investment in that person, whether it's through courses, extra supervision or mentoring.

However, before things get to that stage, it's important to step back and realize that the best way to handle discipline issues is to avoid them in the first place.

An efficient way to avoid

will make a manager's work easier by declining the job.

Once someone is hired, a manager must realize that they can't begin to build a relationship with an employee when things start to go wrong.

It's every manager's responsibility to build a good working rapport from the day that an employee starts, so the relationship is in place and well founded. This can be daunting, especially if a manager is overworked or has many team members to deal with, but it's important.

Sometimes, however, an employee will join the organization, not be a good fit for any number of reasons, and either cannot or will not improve. In that situation, termination is often the only way forward.

Many managers agonize about firing people. It's never easy but the best way to approach it is to do your job as manager. This means communicating clear expectations and offering help when appropriate. If the employee still cannot make the grade, effectively that employee will have terminated themselves.

Whether the employee is incapable of the required performance or simply doesn't want to achieve it, sometimes letting someone go allows everyone involved to move on.

Terminating someone's employment is not always the end of the process. Sometimes, people sue for wrongful dismissal, especially if they feel they have not been treated fairly. The best protection from lawsuits is to set expectations early and treat all employees fairly.

If discipline or termination becomes necessary, it should happen within an established progressive discipline protocol that documents all of the steps, including timelines, what was communicated, what was required from the employee, how management was willing to help and why the ultimate decision to terminate employment was made.

Even if all reasonable efforts are made, sometimes letting an employee go will be complicated. In those cases, it's best to consult a lawyer before taking action.

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are fine.

People then may ask themselves: "If that person can get away with it, why shouldn't I do it, too?" In that situation, the initial problem just grows bigger and harder to deal tackle.

In most situations, if a casual comment doesn't achieve the desired effect, formal discipline should be initiated. The disciplinary process used by most organizations is 'progressive.' Like practising medicine, it goes from the least invasive to the most invasive

behaviour, and when it must occur.

Too often, managers say an employee's performance is not good, but aren't specific enough about how it should change, the timeline or what help is available. While solutions to some problems are easy and obvious — for example, if a worker dresses unprofessionally, they should make the change immediately even if it means being sent home that day — others can be complex.

Take, for instance, an employee at a public accounting firm who

having to discipline or terminate employees is to hire the right people in the first place and ensure that they know what the job requires before they accept it.

If you don't want to settle for average employees who do what's in their job description and nothing more, rewrite the job description to reflect what you really require and make it abundantly clear during the hiring process.

Often, the people who might have required discipline later on