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3 basic steps for dealing with performance issues

In a classic "Seinfeld" episode, Jerry suggests to Elaine and George that they have lunch at a new soup restaurant he's discovered.

However he warns, "the guy that runs the place is a little temperamental, especially in the ordering procedure. He's secretly referred to as the Soup Nazi."

"Why? What happens if you don't order right?" Elaine asks. "He yells, and you don't get your soup," Jerry replies.

If you saw the episode, you know what happens next. They go to the restaurant, enter to the right, order their soup with no emotion, place their money on the counter and move to the left.

But instead of taking his soup with no comment, George complains about not getting any bread. When told he will have to pay extra for bread even though everyone else received free bread, he complains again.

The response by the "Soup Nazi" is swift and brutal. "No soup for you!" he yells and

No one wants to be secretly referred to as the 'Office Nazi.'

returns George's money. There is no appeal, the interaction is ended, and George has no lunch.

Although the "Soup Nazi's" interaction with his customers makes for good entertainment, it is not the type of behavior that practicing leaders want to emulate.

Organizational leaders deal with performance problems on a regular basis, and no one wants to be secretly referred to as the "Office Nazi." Most leaders would prefer to be considered approachable, compassionate and fair, especially under unfavorable circumstances.

However, to reach that goal, leaders need to avoid rash behavior and instead take a more measured approach when dealing with performance issues. The following are some suggestions that can help a leader achieve a more favorable outcome when dealing with employee performance problems.

1. Private meeting

First, anytime there is a perceived performance problem, schedule a private meeting with the employee involved.

You may want to meet in a location other than the immediate work area to ensure privacy and to make sure the conversation will not be overheard by co-workers.

Meeting with the employee before or after normal working hours may also satisfy this requirement if private space is limited. Make sure you allow sufficient uninterrupted time for a full discussion.

Even though you think you may know all the facts, remember there are always two sides to a story, so prepare accordingly.

2. Be direct

Second, be direct in your explanation of what you perceive to be the problem. Be specific about events, interactions, time frames and other

important pieces of information relating to the issue.

Don't be surprised if there is a difference of opinion at this point about what happened or if the employee becomes defensive or emotional. Maintain your composure, be a good listener and make sure the employee realizes you are unhappy with the observed behavior and not them as an individual.

End the meeting by telling them you will consider their input and will schedule a follow-up meeting in the near future.

3. Follow up

Finally, allow some time to pass before you schedule the follow-up meeting.

During the period between the two meetings, review the facts of the case and the consequences of the inappropriate behavior. Consider the employee's past record and tenure with the organization.

Ask yourself if inexperience or lack of proper training could be a contributing factor.

After you have reviewed all of the facts, make your decision. It is important that the corrective action you decide on is consistent with previous cases and that the punishment fits the crime.

Then it's time to schedule the second meeting with the employee and explain the corrective action you are taking. If additional training is appropriate, make sure it is scheduled.

End the meeting by offering your assistance with future problems and expressing confidence that the employee's performance will improve.

If you have done your job right, you will avoid the "Office Nazi" label and all the problems that go with it.

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