

SHRM

WHITE

PAPER

DEVELOPMENTAL COUNSELING

By Wayne Williams, PHR

April 2000

Reviewed September 2002

Introduction/Purpose

Despite significant technological advances in communication systems, face-to-face interaction with employees is still the most effective tool in counseling employees to sustain or enhance job performance. Performance counseling serves several purposes. It:

- Provides the employee with his/her supervisor's expectations;
- Orients the employee to organizational policies,
- Establishes objective goals for the rating period; and
- Communicates career-mapping strategies.

Within the first 30 days of an employee's date of hire, an initial integration and reception (orientation) counseling should be conducted. Performance counseling should then be continued on a quarterly (no less than semi-annually) basis for the length of the employee's tenure with the organization.

Perhaps the greatest obstacles in carrying out counseling duties are the skill deficiencies of the counselor and the absence of counseling guidance. This White Paper is furnished to address these hindrances and provide human resource managers with guidance in establishing a format for training supervisors to conduct developmental counseling sessions.

The Developmental Counseling Process

Counseling effectiveness is measured by achieved outcomes. Using this standard as the benchmark, motivating employees to obtain desired performance thresholds and to maintain or elevate performance outputs becomes paramount. By implementing counseling that focuses on developing employees to assume roles within the organization that require greater degrees of autonomy and responsibility, desired outcomes of enhanced performance can be achieved. But what makes developmental counseling different from any other counseling?

Developmental counseling is a shared effort. It is employee-centered communication that produces an action plan outlining how individual and organizational goals will be achieved. If conducted properly, the counseling will help employees become better team members and contributors, maintain or improve performance and illuminate career progression opportunities. Developmental counseling should be thought of as a four-step process consisting of:

- *Identify the need for counseling.*
 - o Developmental needs are identified through two-way communication and honest feedback. Rather than waiting for events to happen, managers can positively impact outcomes by actively monitoring employee performance for development indicators. Communication should consist of identifying expectations and benchmarking those expectations against established objective standards.
- *Prepare for counseling.*
 - o Select a suitable location free of distracting sights and sounds.
 - o Schedule a time that does not compete with major organizational events and minimizes interruptions. Generally, the counseling session should not exceed 30 minutes. Schedule a second session if more time is needed.
 - o Allow the employee time to prepare for the counseling by providing advance notice. Counseling following a specific event should be conducted as close to the occurrence as possible.
 - o Organize information to ensure the focus of the counseling is on specific and objective behaviors that the employee must maintain or improve, as well as a plan of action with clear attainable goals.
 - o Create an informal atmosphere that promotes two-way communication. However, be cognizant that some situations make an informal atmosphere inappropriate.
- *Conduct counseling.* The four basic components of a counseling session are as

follows:

- o Open the session. State the purpose of the counseling and review previously established performance goals.
 - o Discuss the issues. Employ active listening; respond and question without dominating the conversation. When the issue is sub-standard performance be sure to cite specific observations to reduce the perception of being bias or judgmental.
 - o Develop the plan of action (to include counselor responsibilities).
 - o Record and close the session.
- *Follow up.*
 - o Support plan of action implemented.
 - o Assess the plan of action.

Role of the Counselor

The role of the counselor is pivotal to the success of the counseling process. It is the counselor who outlines the counseling session, identifies the event and the person, establishes the time and location, determines the style of counseling to use and creates the atmosphere in which the counseling will take place. To be effective as a counselor, managers must master three general skills needed in almost every situation:

- *Active listening*, which involves attentively listening to the words an employee is saying and observing the nonverbal behaviors and manners to address internalized thoughts and feelings.
- *Responding* to the employee verbally and non-verbally. Verbal responses should consist of summarizing, interpreting and clarifying communicated messages. Refrain from smothering the employee by over-talking him/her and avoid constant interruptions. Non-verbal responses consist of:
 - o Eye contact. Maintaining eye contact without staring demonstrates sincere interest. Be sure to consider cultural differences in determining proper eye contact.
 - o Body posture. Avoid slouching, but be relaxed. Present an open posture, facing the employee and leaning forward to exhibit sincerity.
 - o Head nods. Occasional head nods demonstrate agreement and encourages

the employee to continue to communicate.

o Facial expressions. Facial expressions should appear natural and relaxed.

- *Questioning* should be open-ended. Well-posed questions may help verify understanding, encourage further explanation or help move an employee through the stages of the counseling session.

In addition to mastery of the three general skills, managers must infuse into their behavior and language qualities that promote candidness and reinforce principles of fairness. The actions of a well-intentioned counselor can be misinterpreted if not delivered in the proper context. By using the qualities listed below as a morale compass, the counselor/manager can navigate complexities arising from ethical considerations. Qualities of an effective counselor are as follows:

- *Respect for person being counseled.* Mutual respect improves the chances of changing (or maintaining) behavior and achieving outlined goals.
- *Self-awareness and cultural awareness.* You must be fully aware of your values, needs and biases prior to counseling employees. Self-aware managers are less likely to allow their biases to influence the counseling process. In addition, managers need to be cognizant of the similarities and differences between individuals of different cultural backgrounds and how these factors may influence values, perspectives and actions.
- *Empathy.* Empathy allows you to see the situation from the other person's view. It provides a grounding effect on the plan of action, ensuring that it is feasible and achievable from the perspectives of the employer and employee.
- *Credibility.* Managers achieve credibility by being honest and consistent in their statements and actions.

Managers need to recognize the influence that common counseling mistakes can have on the outcome of a counseling session and consequently on employee performance. Effective managers can avoid common counseling mistakes that hinder the counseling process through awareness. Common errors made by managers when conducting counseling sessions are as follows:

- Personal bias.
- Rash judgments.
- Stereotyping.
- Losing emotional control.

- Inflexible counseling methods.
- Improper follow-up.

Counseling Styles and Approaches to Counseling

Perhaps the most difficult challenge new managers are faced with is determining what style of counseling to use. Experienced managers realize early on that a single counseling style will not apply universally to all situations with the same effectiveness. To conduct effective counseling, a counseling style should be developed using the characteristics listed below:

- *Purpose.* Clearly define the purpose of the counseling. State the reason for conducting the counseling up front. (For example: I asked you here today to discuss...)
- *Flexibility.* Fit the counseling style to the character of each employee and to the relationship desired. The situation should always dictate the style of counseling. Keeping this in mind, remember that counseling styles can change during the counseling session and that you are not locked into any one style.
- *Respect.* View employees as unique, complex individuals, each with a distinct set of values, beliefs and attitudes. Value employee differences and seek out common ground to enhance the communication process.
- *Communication.* Establish open, two-way communication using spoken language, nonverbal actions, gestures and body language.
- *Support.* Encourage subordinates through actions.

Three general approaches to counseling are commonly employed: telling, coaching and selling.

Telling is a directive approach to counseling best suited for addressing simple problems or making on-the-spot performance corrections where time is limited and action must be prompt. Under this approach, the supervisor or counselor does most of the talking during the counseling session and directs the employee concisely on what to do and when to do it. The major disadvantage to employing the telling approach is that it discourages employees from taking part in formulating alternatives, consequently inhibiting personal and professional growth.

Coaching is a non-directive approach that is preferred for most counseling sessions. Supervisors/ counselors using this approach spend most of their time listening rather than talking. Employees are encouraged to develop action plans and counselors ensure that action plans support goals and objectives. This approach is time intensive and requires the greatest amount of counselor skill. Also, for this approach to be effective employees must openly communicate, maturely present goals and actively uncover alternatives. One of the positive

attributes of employing this type of counseling is that it encourages personal responsibility.

Selling is a combined approach that uses aspects of both coaching (non-directive) and telling (directive). Using this approach the counselor provides guidance, but avoids directing. Planning and decision-making are responsibilities of the employee, with the counselor assisting with the development and evaluation of alternatives.

Improving Counseling Skills

As managers become more experienced with conducting counseling sessions, they tend to succumb to the vanity of their accumulated knowledge and deviate from basic counseling principles. One way to avoid this pitfall is to re-familiarize with counseling guidelines prior to conducting counseling sessions, preferably during the outline phase. Some general guidelines to keep in mind when outlining the counseling session and conducting counseling include:

- Determine the employee's role in the situation and what has been done to resolve the problem or improve performance.
- Avoid drawing conclusions based on one person's perspective.
- Be understanding of what the employee is telling you. Show empathy, but avoid feeling like you must rescue the employee.
- Ask questions to obtain only the information needed.
- Keep communication open-ended.
- Give the employee your full attention.
- Avoid interrogating.
- Keep personal experience out of counseling session.
- Listen actively.
- Remain objective.
- Avoid confirming an employee's prejudices.
- Follow-up on the employee's progress.
- Maintain "memorandum for record" of counseling session.

Summary/Conclusion

A universal counseling outline or style applicable to every situation and employee does not exist. Counseling styles and approaches vary with each counselor and each employee being counseled. An approach that worked with an employee in a previous counseling session may be ineffective to use with that employee in a current counseling session. Developmental counseling, as a tool, provides managers with the flexibility to tailor counseling sessions to the needs of the individual employee. Recognizing that each employee is an individual with individual thoughts and needs, developmental counseling emphasizes the human aspect of human resource management.

The bottom-line of developmental counseling is that everyone benefits! The employee knows exactly where he/she stands in relation to achieving goals and reaching performance steps that aid career development. The manager gains insight into the motivations of the people working in his/her section and how best to assist in the development of action plans which compliment employees' abilities. The organization retains motivated employees who understand their role and the roles of others in contributing to the goals and culture of the organization.

Supporting Reference

Headquarters, U.S. Department of the Army. *Army Leadership: Be, Know, Do. Field Manual (FM) 22-100*, August 1999: Appendix C.

Suggested Reading

Spears, John A., Emil K. Kleuver, William L. Lynch, Michael T. Matthies and Thomas L. Owens. "Striking a Balance in Leader Development: A Case for Conceptual Competence," *National Security Program Discussion Paper* series, No. 92-02. Cambridge: John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, 1992.

Thanks to Wayne Williams, PHR of the SHRM Human Resources Development Committee, for contributing this article. It is intended as information only and is not a substitute for professional or legal advice.

For more information on this subject, send an e-mail to the SHRM Information Center at infocen@shrm.org, please [click here](#) to ask the Information Center for help.