

Five Tips for Helping an Employee on a Performance Improvement Plan



When an employee is struggling, especially one who shows a lot of promise, what do you do? A Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) may be the best way to reverse course and get your employee back on track. When an organization is committed to a PIP, it shows a genuine interest in the employee's career and strengths, highlighting ways to help them grow, and provides a specific action plan to improve performance. In addition to supporting an employee on a PIP to meet their performance goals will help the organization understand what's holding them back and give them a chance to overcome these issues.

Although a performance improvement plan can feel a bit like a punishment, these tips will help navigate an employee through the process with minimum conflict so all involved can benefit from the experience.



Be Specific and Objective

While difficult conversations are unavoidable if your employee's performance is slipping, it's essential to talk about performance issues as soon as possible. That way, the person is aware of the situation before being placed on a Performance Improvement Plan. Lead the conversation by giving them examples of how their work isn't up to the expected standards, explaining why their performance is slipping. Be open to questions and listen to any outside factors that might be negatively affecting their performance will assure the employee that you are on their side – it's in the best interest of the company to have the employee improve. It's crucial to end a PIP conversation on a positive but professional note.

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Align Plans and Goals

Make sure you discuss in detail what is expected of your employee's job performance and behavior during the PIP. Once you specifically communicate what the expectations for success in the role are, you will ensure that your employee knows exactly what correcting their performance looks like. You need to make sure you both agree on what the specific and measurable objectives that are achievable, relevant, and time-bound (also known as SMART goals) outcomes will be.

The duration of a PIP differs depending upon the complexity of the issue and how quickly it takes for the corrective action to show signs of improvement. During this period, direct supports should share with the employee the resources and training they will need to get back on track. It's also vital to provide feedback and communicate the entire time your employee is on a PIP to discuss progress and assist them in areas they're struggling with.

Example: During this 90-day performance evaluation, John Smith must have perfect attendance, apart from approved medical or family absences. This means that he must clock in and be ready for work by the start of each scheduled shift, return from all scheduled breaks on time and remain at work for his entire shift.

Acknowledge Potential Outcomes

Acknowledging potential outcomes represents one of the best ways to increase motivation of the employee on a performance improvement plan. Before the employee begins the PIP, specifically communicate what the consequences are if the employee fails to fulfill the performance plan objectives – will they be fired? Will they lose their bonus? Will this affect their contract? Clearly stating exactly what your employee risks losing if they do not effectively complete their PIP ensures everyone is on the same page when it comes to outcomes.

To keep your employee from becoming totally defeated by being placed on a PIP, it's important to also share what the employee has done well and the goals they have accomplished. This shows them you do value them and care that they come out of the PIP successfully. It shows the path your employee can use to improve their performance and that their efforts are valued.

Follow Up Regularly

Regularly checking in on an employee on the performance improvement plan to monitor progress and discuss what's working and what's not shows your employee that you're still on their side and care about their future at the company. This might be a daily check-in, weekly meetings, or bi-weekly progress reports – the key is staying in a cadence of communication. These follow-ups should take place in a comfortable and private setting best since your employee is likely embarrassed about being on a PIP and may want to keep their status discreet.

While these meetings should be a two-way street of communication, encourage your employee to lead these meetings. Having them self-report on how they feel they are doing also helps identify realizations they may have made. This will lead to natural growth and make it more likely the outcome of the PIP will be positive.

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Document the Conversations and Progress

It's easy to forget what was discussed and when. Keeping detailed records of your conversations with the employee can help you ensure that, if termination is the final result, there are no mixed messages about why the decision was made. Since performance growth is vital when an employee is on the PIP, keeping track of progress in both strengths and weaknesses and saving a copy for both parties to review will be extremely beneficial to all involved. Your employee will be able to see exactly where you thought improvements were or weren't made and compare it with how they feel they're doing. If there's a disconnect here, you'll both have specific examples to point to and work from going forward. You want your employee to succeed, so keeping track of feedback is critical.

Putting an underperforming employee on a PIP can be difficult, but it's the right move. While it may make them upset in the moment, it shows them you care about their success and future with the company. To help your employee successfully make it through a PIP, it's crucial to be specific about expectations and objectives, align their goals for success, acknowledge all possible outcomes, and document the progress with examples.

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