

PIPs can eliminate long-term performance problems

We all know it's true. There are some federal employees who work below their grade level because they can't do the work for which they are being paid.

"Eventually time passes them by," said Robbie Kunreuther, director of Government Personnel Services, a training firm in Seattle.

They often get away with it, he said, "because they are nice people" and no one wants to take action against them. This may change with a new supervisor, but some essential documentation is required. Once HR tells the new supervisor what is needed for a performance improvement plan, Kunreuther said, enthusiasm often wanes.

This is a shame, said federal personnel management consultant Stephen Schumacher, because it is "not particularly complicated."

As an HR professional, you need to guide the supervisor through the process, so here are some tips:

When should a PIP be issued?

An agency may subject an employee to removal or reduction in grade for failure to meet the performance standards it has established for one or more critical elements of the employee's position. 5 USC 4303. Schumacher recommends that managers take action as soon as unacceptable performance is established. They "do not and should not have to wait" until the end of the rating period, he said.

Schumacher said every PIP notification requires establishment of these four basics:

1. What is unacceptable in the employee's performance in at least one critical element.
2. What level of performance is required to be at least minimally acceptable.
3. Notice that continued unacceptable performance within the time frame of the PIP will lead to reduction in grade or removal.
4. Offer of assistance by the manager to help the employee improve.

The notice must include "what the manager will do to assist the employee," and you must strongly advise the manager to comply with what was promised, Schumacher stressed.

The manager must do so "professionally and civilly without a great deal of emotion," he said. "No yelling."

If a removal is appealed, the record must show genuine effort was made to help the employee improve, "without hostility," and through "substantive, structured, focused meetings," he said.

Correct 'weasel words'

Unfortunately, Kunreuther said, most performance standards are too vague.

"We don't know the difference between a D and an F," he said. "We tend to obscure what 'unacceptable' is."

Don't waste 'matches' on unmotivated employees

Does an employee on a performance improvement plan ever improve to the point that removal or reduction in grade is not necessary? Yes, says Robbie Kunreuther, but adds that the employees most likely to improve are those who should not have been issued PIPs in the first place — those who can do the work, but for some reason won't.

Tell managers to reserve PIPS for the "can'ts," Kunreuther said. PIPs may work to "light a fire" under those who have motivational issues, but they are too paperwork-intensive. Managers can light a fire under them with the "much more economical progressive discipline," he said. "It takes fewer matches." ■

He said supervisors must analyze performance standards and "correct whatever weasel words they find with metrics." Performance standards may be defined and clarified in PIPs.

And remember, he said, nothing requires "precise bean-counting" for all employees. All you need is a nondiscriminatory business reason for the more precise standard in the PIP, such as past unacceptable performance.

When PIPs are given to employees with long-term performance problems, Kunreuther said, it is almost always because a new supervisor is determined to address the situation. But the supervisor needs to get over the hump of initial resistance, which may even come from HR.

Keep in mind, doing the right thing may not be that big a deal. A long PIP period is not necessary, Schumacher said. For many jobs with routine, repetitive work, 30 days is enough. For higher level professional jobs, he said, 60 to 90 days may be needed to get enough work product to evaluate — but at the most 120 days.

Managers, supervisors and employee relations specialists, he said, often "tie themselves in knots unnecessarily." They should concentrate on the basic elements contained in a proper PIP notification, and on fulfilling the promise of assistance to the employee.

"ER specialists can become overly cautious at the expense of line managers," Schumacher warned. Both must work together. However easy you try to make the process, he said, there are pitfalls, and managers must not attempt to go it alone.

Once the manager determines the employee has not fulfilled the requirements of the PIP, do not hesitate to recommend and assist in an action to remove or reduce in grade.

Fortunately, Schumacher said, the Merit Systems Protection Board has clarified requirements and made performance-based actions much easier. ■

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