# MSPB Finds Monitoring of Work, More Feedback Best for Improving Performance

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**Following is a section of a recent MSPB white paper on performance-related issues examining results of a recent survey of federal supervisors regarding what strategies have proven to be the most effective in addressing deficient performance by their employees.**

The 2016 MPS asked supervisors who reported that they had supervised a person who failed a critical element which methods they had attempted to assist the employee to improve and to what extent the attempt was successful. Most supervisors tried multiple methods. Although no method was consistently very successful, every listed method was successful to some extent or more for at least a quarter of the supervisors who attempted it.

The decision to attempt a particular method—or group of methods—may be influenced by agency policies, collective bargaining agreements, advice from subject matter experts, legal concerns, human resources advisors, past experience, employee requests for a specific form of help, or other influences. Overall, 75 percent of supervisors reported attempting 10 or more different methods for their most recent poor performer. However, none of the listed approaches was considered effective to some extent or better by a majority of supervisors. Items ranged from 28 to 47 percent of those respondents who tried a method reporting that it was effective to some or a great extent.

The most effective method to help a poor performer to become fully successful appeared to be monitoring the employee’s work more closely (47 percent of respondents agreeing to at least some extent). However, there was a general cluster of activities that were within a few percentage points of each other, such as: meeting more frequently to provide feedback and coaching (45 percent); providing additional written or oral communications about expectations (43 and 42 percent, respectively); and discussing possible negative consequences for continued poor performance (42 percent).

Monitoring Work More Closely

Monitoring work more closely was seen as the most effective approach to addressing unsuccessful performance. It can require more time from supervisors, many of whom have a lot of different tasks to perform, often including some non-supervisory duties. This investment of time appears to be more productive than many other choices when seeking to improve the performance of an employee who is failing in a critical performance element. Even so, fewer than half of supervisors who attempted closer monitoring considered it effective to “some extent” or a “great extent.” When deciding which efforts to make in order to assist employees to improve, supervisors should consider the nature of the work and the employee in question as well as the investment of time and resources that a particular approach will require.

Providing Feedback and Coaching

It is not surprising that feedback and coaching would be among the more successful approaches to helping poor performers given how useful feedback is for enhancing the performance of most employees. They may have a preventative as well as ameliorating effect.

To evaluate the effects of feedback, we asked 2016 MPS respondents (including non-supervisors) if the respondent’s supervisor provided timely feedback and if the supervisor provided constructive feedback. Employees who received weaker feedback were more likely to report that they had coworkers who: (1) were performing below expectations; and (2) performing so poorly that the respondent believed the coworkers should be removed.

In other words, not only did supervisors find that feedback was one of the more effective methods for improving the poor performance of unsuccessful performers, but employees who perceived their supervisors as providing such feedback were less likely to perceive that there were weak or poor performers in the work unit. We did not ask if the respondent’s supervisor routinely provided timely and constructive feedback to other employees, as the respondent might not know what other employees are experiencing. However, it may be that supervisors providing timely and effective feedback as a routine matter for all employees could be helpful to prevent the development as well as the persistence of poor or weak performance in the workplace.

Communicating Expectations to the Employee

Slightly more than 40 percent of supervisors reported that providing additional guidance on expectations was effective to at least some extent. Written and oral communication were seen as nearly equal in effectiveness. As with other methods to assist a poor performer to improve, the success of a method will vary based on the employee and the situation. Presumably, this approach is most likely to succeed when there is reason to suspect the employee may not understand what is expected of him or her. However, as discussed in the section on removing poor performers, there are also legal and administrative reasons to provide and document this guidance.18

Additionally, communicating expectations can be a matter of fairness as well as simply a sound investment of time. It is only fair to ensure that an employee knows what is expected of him or her. Furthermore, if an employee is skilled and merely misdirecting those skills because of a misunderstanding about what management expects the employee to do, helping the employee to redirect his or her efforts is far better than allowing the efforts to remain misdirected. It also may not be in the interest of the Government to remove a skilled employee who could have performed well with clearer direction, only to start over again with another employee who may also labor unsuccessfully under unclear direction.

Discussing Possible Negative Consequences

Forty-two percent of supervisors stated that discussing “possible negative consequences” with the employee was effective to at least some extent. However, the MPS did not define this term. To the respondent, this could have meant warnings of a potential demotion or removal, a denial of a within-grade increase (WIGI), or less severe actions such as a lower than average appraisal rating or smaller than average performance award. It is also possible that for some supervisors this included warnings of a future performance improvement period (PIP) if performance did not improve. A PIP, while intended to help an employee, could be seen as a potential negative consequence because such a period can be a precursor to a demotion or removal action.

We explored possible reasons why a discussion of negative consequences might have been among the more successful steps supervisors took. Results from the 2016 MPS suggested two possible reasons. The first reason is that a warning may correct an employee’s mistaken assumption that the organization overlooks or accepts poor performance. In the 2016 MPS, only 32 percent of employees agreed with the statement “In my work unit, steps are taken to deal with a poor performer who cannot or will not improve.” This suggests that many employees believe that their organization will tolerate rather than confront poor performance—or, perhaps even worse, that their organization will not even notice it.

The second, related reason is that a warning may clarify or reinforce a previous message that was lacking in clarity or force. Merely communicating the presence of a problem (such as saying “I’m not happy about your performance”) does not necessarily communicate the seriousness of that problem. A warning—which goes further, saying “I’m not happy about your performance and I will not tolerate it”—makes the supervisor’s displeasure and determination clear, which might motivate the employee to improve.

Other Methods to Assist Employees to Improve

There were several other methods that supervisors found effective to varying degrees when seeking to assist unsuccessful performers to become fully successful. These include: asking the employee how the supervisor can help; providing a mentor; and changing the work assignments or expectations for quality or quantity. While these approaches tended to be less successful, some supervisors found each of these successful to a great extent.

Therefore, a strategy of educating supervisors about options for addressing poor performance—and then granting supervisors reasonable discretion to choose among those options—seems best. This strategy may seem inconsistent with the clearly-defined procedural requirements for performance-based adverse actions and the principle of treating similarly-situated employees in a similar manner, which appear to counsel (or mandate) a uniform or standardized approach. This strategy may also require agencies to modify their policies or negotiate changes to collective bargaining agreements. However, we note that “similar treatment of similarly-situated employees” does not mean “identical treatment of all poor-performing employees, regardless of the nature or causes of the poor performance.” Also, it is not in the interest of the workforce or the agency to require supervisors to use the same approach to different performance problems if those problems are better addressed with an approach tailored to the specific performance deficiencies.