



## A GUIDE FOR MANAGERS

*As a manager of individuals with mental health concerns, Mary Ann Baynton has handled the intricacies of coaching distressed employees. As Director of Mental Health Works, she is sharing these experiences with managers and employers so they can support their employees without losing sight of the workplace's needs. "For my business to succeed, I need my entire team to perform," says Baynton. "And even if an employee is facing a mental illness or another of life's challenges, it's my job to help that person remain successful at work."*

*Mental Health Works is an initiative of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario. It brings together a range of resources to help organizations meet their obligations to employees experiencing mental health issues such as depression or anxiety in the workplace. As Baynton points out, these obligations include fair, appropriate supervision to ensure that all staff meet the goals and objectives of their positions. This is not just good for business - this approach can actually assist the employee in recovery and wellness.*

*"Managers today are aware that there are legal requirements to accommodate people with disabilities, including mental illnesses in the workplace," notes Baynton. "What most have trouble with is balancing those requirements with their performance management responsibilities, but it's possible to strike that balance." To help, she offers six guidelines to coaching distressed employees.*

### Start with Strengths

If you see that an employee's performance is suffering, whether or not it is as a result of a mental health issue, Baynton suggests it's always useful to articulate the strengths that individual brings to the team.

"Acknowledging unique skills is a way to indicate that you want the employee there as a valued contributor, take the focus away from the problem and work towards a solution."

Tom Regehr agrees. Regehr spent years battling serious depression, and his boss was instrumental in building his self-esteem. Talking about his success at his first job after years of unemployment due to his illness, he says, "How I was treated there had a lot to do with it. He said, 'we need your skills; we need you here, so tell me what you need to do that.' I squared back my shoulders and I worked hard for that guy."

"Beginning the performance management process by placing the focus on the employee's value to the workplace sets the right tone for the rest of the discussion" says Baynton.

### Be Clear about Concerns and Expectations

When coaching a person experiencing a mental health issue, it's important to be clear about the changes in performance that are causing you concern. "Being clear doesn't mean bringing out a list of specific instances, with dates and times," cautions Baynton. "That will put your employee on the defensive. But it does mean saying

more than just 'Your performance could be better.' If you see that your employee has been missing critical deadlines or if sales figures have fallen, you should say so and help them to understand how this affects the organization."

The clarity should also extend to your expectations. "As with any performance management process, the employee must understand what is expected," says Baynton. "And where there is flexibility, he or she must understand that as well." Clarity means that the expectations are measurable, specific and work-related. Expectations should not be focused on personality or vague values such as teamwork or positive attitude. When someone is not well due to illnesses such as depression, such conversations are confusing. Saying that you expect every criticism during meetings to be accompanied by a possible solution or that their participation should be no more than other team members are both objectives that can be measured and are about work rather than mood.

## Offer Help

There are two parts to offering help. One is to be aware of resources and be able to offer these to your employees. Organizational resources may include an employee assistance program or a wellness department. Community resources include clinics, crisis lines, support groups and hospital programs. Having this at your fingertips and available to all employees can save time and anguish.

The second part to offering help is to pose the question to the employee. This is the foundation of the Mental Health Works approach. Asking the employee, "What can I do to help you be successful at your job?" is a sign of respect for the employee's ability to consider solutions. It is also an important way for the employer to get commitment to the solution created in part by the employee themselves, rather than compliance to your solution. When this suggestion is presented, the initial response by employers is sometimes that this is a dangerous usurping of their power and control, but when they implement it, their experience is much different. Employees who are supported in finding a way to keep their job in spite of their illness are grateful and innovative in their search for a way to express their loyalty. Moreover, the employee understands their job better than anyone and can come up with creative ways to accomplish the necessary outcomes without annoying co-workers or negatively impacting the bottom line.

## Collaborate on Goals

Working with your employee to develop realistic, achievable goals is key to all successful performance management, and it's particularly important if mental health issues are involved. Collaborating with the employee to develop goals ensures their commitment. Further, if the employee has participated in setting the goals and is still unable to achieve them, it may help motivate them to seek treatment or support if mental health is indeed an issue. Where the employer sets the goals arbitrarily and the employee fails to achieve them, it may only serve to confirm to the employee that the employer is demanding or unreasonable.

This collaboration must be genuine. "Ask the employee what they will do to meet the performance expectations," says Baynton. "Help to brainstorm solutions. Make sure the goals are ones you set together and try to agree on the timeframes to meet them. If you set goals with, rather than for, your employee, you will improve their commitment to the process."

## Follow up

Don't let the process end there. The employee must realize you're committed to long-term solutions for the performance challenges. Monitor the situation, be sure to follow up on a regular basis and to have a clear way to evaluate progress and provide clarity around the consequences if the performance issues persist. Create goals that are measurable, and ask the employee to do as much self-assessment as possible. Continue to be clear about your expectations. That means encouraging the employee when the goals are met, but also making him or her accountable when they're not.

Meeting with the employee on a regular basis for short periods of time will help create a sense of continuity and support that will make these goals much more achievable.

### Agree on Next Steps

The need for collaboration continues throughout the performance management process. If the goals set jointly by the manager and the employee have not been met, it follows that both parties should be involved in determining the response. How the results of the performance management are written up, and what the next steps are should be discussed by the manager and the employee.

But that doesn't mean that managers should not take action when necessary. "Managers must hold the individual accountable for their performance and productivity," advises Baynton. "This may seem like 'tough-love' towards someone who is possibly ill, but in denial. In fact, it may be the impetus required for the person to gain insight into their difficulties and finally access the help they need."

#### THE BENEFITS TO COLLABORATION

While collaborating with employees when performance issues arise may seem difficult to managers, it actually makes the performance management process in all cases, and particularly where there are challenges such as mental health issues, much easier. Where the process has been truly collaborative, employees should recognize that the treatment they have received is fair. The potentially confrontational situation can be effectively diffused by clear, open dialogue.

"Getting your employees' 'buy-in' to a collaborative process makes performance management much easier," says Baynton. "This is true of every performance management process, but it's especially true when there may be mental health concerns."

Collaborative performance management ensured that Baynton's business flourished, as did her high-achieving staff, including those who experienced mental illnesses while working there. "My goal with Mental Health Works is to ensure that managers can step right in to a situation fully prepared," says Baynton. "I was fortunate to be taught by my employees about how to successfully manage them through their mental health issues. They showed me how to support them and told me to expect competence from them, even when they were unwell. They shared with me how pity or having expectations lowered was damaging to them. My experience taught me a great deal - I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to pass it along to others."

