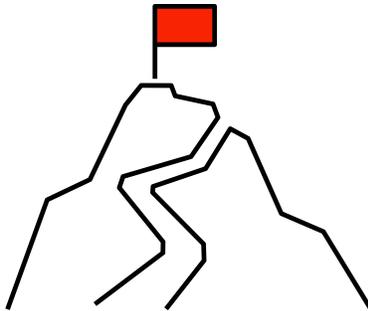


A Guide To Effective Counseling

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Introduction

Counseling sessions are at the heart of the supervisor/employee relationship. They are how we help individuals to become their very best selves. Supervisors & managers should utilize counseling sessions as their preferred employee developmental method. This guide covers how I've learned to conduct counseling sessions during the last 20 years. Some trial and lots of errors have helped me hone this process into the one presented. Almost all my supervisors and managers have used the verbal version of this guide (i.e., me explaining my process to them) for many years with great success. If you follow the steps outlined in this guide, I think you will too.

Cheers,

Ryan

1. Counsel the Action, Not the Person

The purpose of counseling is to address our employee's actions in an effort to either **CHANGE** or **REINFORCE** their behavior going forward. Counseling is not to make you feel better because you're upset by your employee, nor is it for you to applaud an individual's intelligence. It's one of the major components of your job as a professional to develop the next generation within your organization.

In order for counseling to be effective a supervisor must understand, absorb and put the following principle into practice:

You counsel the ***ACTION***, not the individual.

Don't say, "You did what? How could you be so stupid?" or "You did what? That was very smart of you!" How can the employee stop being "stupid"? Keep being "smart"? Those are measurements of mental ability...are there any actions the employee can take from those statements? Besides leaving no room for development these comments will either put them on the defensive or make them think there is no room for improvement. It leaves you with nothing to build on.

What if you were to say, "You did what? Do you realize the ramifications of that action?" or "You did what? That was a great thing to do." In each instance you now have the opportunity to speak to how the employee's actions affect the situation. Together you can analyze what led them to that decision. No judgement on the individual's self-worth just commentary on the decision-making process that led to the action.

This is the foundation of effective counseling. Always counsel the action, never the individual.

2. Praise in Public, Correct In Private

The purpose of counseling is to address our employee's actions in an effort to either **CHANGE** or **REINFORCE** their behavior going forward. Your intervention method will directly affect the effectiveness of the counseling session as well as the relationship between you and your employees. Even though you are focusing on actions, you're dealing with people.

Do your best to praise desirable actions in public. Focus on actions you want to reinforce within the larger organization. It doesn't have to be at an official function, nor a company-wide

email. A quick stop by their workstation or area to thank them is typically more than enough. Here's all the goodness this method cultivates: 1) the employee feels good 2) others take note and compliment the employee 3) others are now aware of the preferred behavior 4) you've deepened your relationship with your employees. NOTE: Praising should only be used for those instances that a reasonable person would consider outstanding or excellent work. Also, use your discretion when praising someone who has been struggling with a particular task or expected behavior and finally gets it right (i.e., shows up to work on time after consistently being late or turns in a finished product with zero errors). In this instance, it's best to praise in private. They'll appreciate your candor, and the reinforcement will be more effective.

We correct undesirable actions in private for a very simple reason: ego. When you attempt to counsel someone in public you activate their "fight or flight" response which hinders any effective communication. You cannot change behavior if the person starts defensively posturing or retreats into a shell. When you counsel in a private setting the "fight or flight" response will be muted or non-existent providing you the avenue to address the undesirable actions. Additionally, you are demonstrating a level of respect with the individual by not bringing up the issue in front of other employees.

NOTE: There is a time and place for "Shock & Awe". If you see unsafe or severely unprofessional behavior address the action swiftly & publicly, then follow-up in private. Use your best judgement, just be sure to do it sparingly.

3. Event vs. Developmental Counseling

Event counseling – specific instance where something happened outside of an individual's expected behavior profile requiring correction or reinforcement.

Use this type of counseling to address **SPECIFIC** instances when: 1) continuation of the substandard behavior is unacceptable or 2) continuation of the excellent behavior is desirable. When something abnormal happens, you have to act quickly to: 1) stop it from becoming a habit or 2) reinforce it so it becomes a habit. Regardless, event counseling is a fact-based, targeted method focusing on a specific topic. The methods and procedures for event counseling are covered in Section 5.

Developmental counseling – a fact-based, data driven process to evaluate the employee’s current level of expertise in order to create a strategy to further their professional growth.

This type of counseling has a larger breadth, depth and scope where the supervisor and employee work together to assess the individual’s professional maturation. The methods and procedures for developmental counseling are covered in Section 6.

4. Preparation

Proper preparation is the hallmark of a professional supervisor and vital to the counseling process. Complete the following steps prior to the counseling session:

- Gather all relevant facts and data.
 - Developmental counseling: Performance facts and figures.
 - Event counseling: You figure out the who, what, when, where & how. The employee will furnish the “why” during the session.
- Confirm the date, time and location.
 - Developmental counseling: Make sure the location is free from distractions and that you’ll have it for at least an hour.
 - Event counseling: Same, although you might not need the full hour.
- Create an agenda to make sure you cover the pertinent points.
 - Development counseling: Make sure you have a copy for your employee so they can make notes.
 - Event counseling: Even if it’s just a quick note on a napkin, you’ll want something to keep you focused

Taking time to prepare will help you take full advantage and make the most of your counseling sessions.

5. Event Counseling

Event counseling – specific instance where something happened outside of an individual’s expected behavior profile requiring correction or reinforcement (Examples of correction & reinforcement are included in each step.)

After preparing for the session (Section 4), use the following steps:

- After you both have taken your seats, state the reason for the meeting. Frame the reason around the action taken by the employee –
 - **Correction:** “We’re meeting to discuss your outburst at the customer service desk this morning.”
 - **Reinforcement:** “We’re meeting to talk about your outstanding sales numbers this month.”
- Let the employee know they’ll have a chance to speak, but you want to lay out the facts you’ve gathered about the event – “
 - **Correction:** First, I’ll share what I’ve learned about the events leading up to the outburst, then I’d like to get your description of the events.”
 - **Reinforcement:** “Let me run through the sales figures first, then I’d like to hear what you did this month.”
- Share the facts you’ve gathered and ask them to confirm, amend or deny the information –
 - **Correction:** “When I talked with your partner Sara, she said the customer came in and was extremely frustrated with her bill. Sara said the customer, ‘cursed at you and then threw the bill at you.’ It was at that point you raised your voice and started yelling at the customer. Shortly thereafter, Michael came from his office and told you to ‘walk away’, which you did. Did I miss anything?”
 - **Reinforcement:** “Your numbers came in 50% higher than any month in the last year! I see you had a 15 percent increase in new customers as well. Was there anything you did differently this month?”
- Let them talk, then listen and respond by restating what they said. This way you are ensuring what they THINK they’re saying is what you are HEARING. Continue this until you both feel you have an understanding about what happened –
 - **Correction:** “Yeah, that customer was waiting at the door for us to open so she could rip into us. We even opened up early so she wouldn’t be standing outside in the cold. She started yelling, saying we messed up her bill and took too much money out of her account. There were numerous F-bombs scattered throughout her rant. I kept asking her to calm down and I was keeping my cool up until the point she threw her bill at me. I just snapped after that and started yelling back. That was when Michael came out and told me to leave. That woman is crazy.” NOTE: There’s a chance the person won’t want to talk at first. If that happens, just go back line by line through the data and keep asking if the information is correct. If after that they still don’t want to talk, skip to the next step anyway. If at any point during the session they do begin to talk, come back to this step.
 - **Reinforcement:** “I’ve never been very good at cold calling leads, so last month I asked Sharon how she does it, because she is the best on our team. She pulled a book from her desk and said for me to read it and try some of the strategies. I read it that weekend and on Monday I tried one of the tips and made a sale on my very first call! After that I felt much more confident in making calls and kept at it.”
- State why the action was incorrect or why the action was desirable. –

- o **Correction:** “That customer was completely out of line; however, that does not excuse your actions. We’re first and foremost a professional organization and yelling at a customer is not professional. Period. Imagine what our customers thought of that display.”
- o **Reinforcement:** “Reaching out for help to better develop your skills was a great move. I’m sure others on the team will ask what you did, be sure to share!”
- State what they should have done (Correct the Behavior) or encourage them to continue (Reinforce the Behavior) –
 - o **Correction:** “The moment you felt you were going to lose your composure you should have excused yourself and found a manager.”
 - o **Reinforcement:** “Keep doing what you’re doing and you’ll be giving Sharon a run for top salesperson!”
- Ask if they understand the proper action and wait for their response –
 - o **Correction:** “From here on out whenever you have an upset customer you will get a manager, right?”
- Schedule a follow-up conversation to discuss how things are progressing –
 - o **Correction/Reinforcement:** “Let’s meet again the Thursday after next at 2pm so we can see how things are going. I’ll send you a reminder to your email.” NOTE: Follow-up is covered in greater depth in Section 7
- Close the session and thank the person for their time. You are dealing with a person after all...

6. Developmental Counseling

Developmental counseling – a fact-based, data driven process to evaluate the employee’s current level of expertise in order to create a strategy to further their professional growth.

Think of developmental counseling as a running dialogue where some sessions focus on the individual’s development as a whole while others focus on specific areas of improvement with the overarching goal of increasing the employee’s professional expertise. NOTE: Due to the nature of the conversations you’ll more than likely cross over into personal issues (financial, relationship, parenting, etc...) use your best judgement, but tread carefully.

The following are the basic steps for conducting a general developmental counseling session:

- Conduct your preparation as outlined in **Section 4**. Rather than focusing on a specific instance, also gather data about the employee’s performance.
- After you both have taken your seats, open the session with some light banter to put the individual at ease. Regardless, expect the first meeting to be awkward.

- State the reason for the meeting. Make sure they understand this will be a general discussion of their current development level, a statement of goals and items for the employee to work on before their next session.
- Let the employee know they'll have a chance to speak, but you want to lay out the facts you've gathered about how they see their current level of professional development.
- Share the facts you've gathered and ask them to confirm, amend or contradict the information.
- Let them talk, then listen and respond by restating what they said. This way you are ensuring what they THINK they're saying is what you are HEARING. Continue this until you both agree on the individual's current development.
- Once you agree on the current status, create goals for the employee to work towards. The idea is to create a dialogue between the two of you, not a lecture. NOTE: The term I use with my folks when we're having a session is "we're playing tennis...bouncing thoughts back and forth."
- Create a roadmap for the employee to reach the goal. You do this by working backward from the goal through each step until you reach a point where the individual can take an action *that very day*.
- Schedule a follow-up conversation at a later date to discuss how things are progressing. "Let's meet again the Thursday after next at 2pm so we can see how things are going. I'll send you a reminder to your email." NOTE: Follow-up is covered in greater depth in Section 7
- Reaffirm your support for the individual and make sure they know to come to you for clarification or guidance if they run into trouble.
- Close the session and thank the person for their time. You are dealing with a person after all...

7. Follow Up

Failure to follow up is the top reason employees fail to develop. Collectively we think once we tell someone not to do something they'll stop and are shocked when they return to their old habits. Follow-up is just as important as counseling sessions, but on the whole, we fail at its implementation. Why? Because it involves planning and work outside of our daily workload. However, just like every other part of your job it gets easier the more you do it.

Learning to schedule your follow-up actions will considerably simplify your managerial life. Follow-up serves multiple purposes.

- 1) Checking in on our employee to see how they are handling the change
- 2) Showing support for our employee

3) It builds trust

***Note – If you find the employee has fallen back into old habits make sure you conduct a counseling session.

Best method for scheduling follow-up is to use your office calendar system (Microsoft Outlook, Google Calendar, etc...) or use the calendar on your personal phone to set reminders. Make it something simple, “Check on Bill – Invoices. Check on Sally – Customer Frustrations”. Set them at ever increasing intervals over the course of a few months. Example: Set 1st follow-up 3 days after your session, 2nd a week later, 3rd 2 weeks and so on. Figure out what works best for you and your employee.

REMINDER: You have to follow-up on your counseling sessions.

8. Write It Down

It's time for one of your employee's annual appraisal. You have to use one of the following two lines to sum up their year. Pick one:

- 1) Over the course of the last year, you've had quite a few issues we've had to discuss.
- 2) Over the course of the last year, we've had 10 developmental meetings and 2 event sessions.

Which statement will have a greater impact on your employee?

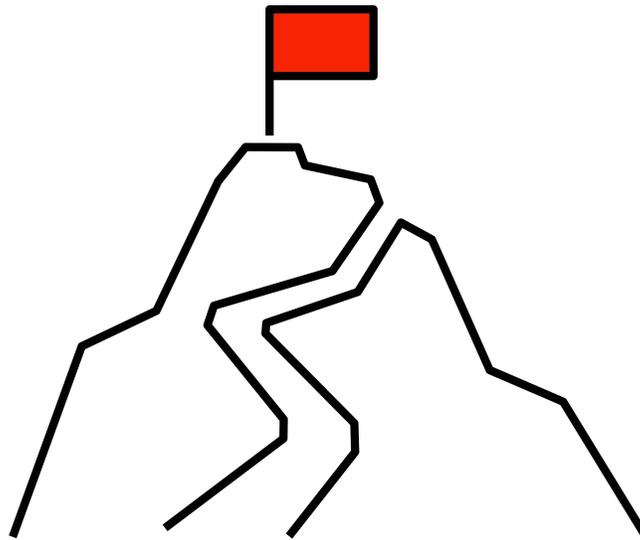
Document every time you have a counseling session with an employee, both formal and informal instances. This way you're addressing facts and data about the employee, not some vague impression of the employee. Keep a running log in your computer or in a notebook...whatever works, just write it down! Bottom line: Everything covered in previous sections is less effective if you fail to keep a record.

Conclusion

Remember - Counseling sessions are at the heart of the supervisor/employee relationship. They are how we help individuals to become their very best selves. Using the methods outlined above will create a framework for effective communication between employees and their supervisors. Now that you have the method, go and give it a try.

Cheers,

Ryan



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