

Tough Conversations Guide

Handling Underperforming Staff

Let's take a look at the most common staffing issues we face in the child care industry:

- not following protocol- ratios, schedule, training, supervision, etc.
- voice level, impatience, or anger
- providing poor care
- negativity
- showing disrespect
- poor attendance
- poor work ethic, lazy, not pulling their weight
- poor social skills or communication skills
- withholding information
- gossip & bickering

Now let's look at why it is important to deal with underperforming staff:

- keeps morale up (hardworking staff will quickly become disengaged if they see co-workers slacking off without any repercussions)
- relays standards-what you will and will not tolerate
- builds trust with others (your other employees will know that you will handle issues)
- builds consistency
- protects your core values & standards
- protects your business's reputation

When you have an underperforming staff member, look at potential reasons, and ask yourself these questions:

- Were they properly trained?
- Are the policies clear?
- How is the Leadership?
- Did I give expectations?
- Would another position or class help?
- Do they have adequate resources?
- Are they the right fit for your business or the ECE industry?

If, after asking yourself the above questions, you immediately identify the problem and know the solution, see if a quick and easy conversation and/or implementation step can solve the issue. If not, it's time to schedule a one-on-one meeting.

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When you have an underperforming staff member, it's time to have a one-on-one meeting. Take the following steps when handling underperforming employees:

- **Handle promptly**-Do not run or avoid conflict. If you don't deal with an underperforming staff member urgently, you are sending a message that this performance or behavior is acceptable. It gives a bad impression to both that individual and the rest of your team. You should try to speak to the employee as soon as possible once the issue has come to your attention.
- **Approach from a positive mindset**- Be in the right state of mind. Do not approach staff when you are frustrated or angry. Make sure you are calm and relaxed. Prepare notes if needed and think about what you are going to say beforehand.
- **Handle the matter privately**- Pick a private place to have the discussion with no distractions and no other listening ears.
- **Lead with empathy**- Be mindful that there may be personal matters going on outside of work. It's important that they see your heart and know you care. Keep in mind that as a leader you have a responsibility to create an environment of learning and growth not one of fear. Make sure your motive is to benefit the person and make them better. Try to start the conversation by saying something positive about the staff member or something they are doing right.
- **Be specific**- Let them know what happened to warrant the discussion. Get to the point within 30 seconds and instead of just speaking in broad terms, be as specific about the issue as you can; be prepared with notes or documentation showing exactly where the problem lies. If the employee is not complying with company policy, have the policy on hand. The discussion should leave absolutely no room for misinterpretation.
- **Let them be heard**- After you let them know what you have observed or what the issue is, let your staff express their thoughts and feelings. Ask 1 or 2 of these questions to start the conversation and get them to open up to you and to also let them know that you are there to support them.
 1. Is there anything I can do to help you with (issue)?
 2. Do you feel like you have been properly supported?
 3. Is there anything that is frustrating you about your job?
 4. Are there any areas that you feel ill-equipped for?
 5. Are there any external factors that could be affecting your work?
 6. Do you feel optimistic about your future with us? Are you happy here?
 7. Is there anything else you want to share with me?

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- **Give Expectations-** Set up an action plan with outcomes for both scenarios. Let them know what needs to change or be adjusted and what you expect from them moving forward. Let them know what you will do to help them achieve the results you are looking for. Let them know what will happen if they do not make the changes needed. You should be sending a clear message and explaining your expectations in a way that is easily understood. Give them a timeline, action steps, and the follow up date that you will check back in with them.
- **Conclude the meeting-** Close the conversation with words of appreciation and understanding. You may want to ensure that they understand the action steps to take moving forward.
- **Schedule a follow up-** schedule another one-on-one meeting at the time discussed, usually 1- 4 weeks is a good time frame depending on the situation. Before the meeting, do an assessment of the previous problem area and see if it has been resolved or has improved based on your knowledge. Prepare your thoughts in advance and once in the meeting, ask the following questions.

Follow-up questions to ask:

1. How are things going?
2. How are you progressing on the action items we set last time?
3. Do you have any thoughts or questions about our last discussion?
4. How are you feeling overall about your work environment?
5. How are you feeling since we last spoke?
6. Are you struggling with anything in particular?

If your employee's performance has improved, acknowledge that the issue has been resolved and discuss how to maintain the improvements. Continue to offer support and encouragement. If your employee's performance hasn't improved, you have 4 options:

- extend, revise, or repeat the process (consider a written warning)
- reduce hours or make them a substitute
- change their position or class
- terminate employment

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