

# Accountability with different outcomes



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A useful tool for identifying coaching issues is to maintain a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis on each employee:

- What do they do well or enjoying doing?
- What areas are lacking or tend to be avoided?
- Are there upcoming openings or new challenges for growth?
- Do anticipated changes in the business or technology expose risk?

The goal is to co-develop a mutually beneficial plan to take advantage of a positive (strength or opportunity) or to abate a negative (weakness or threat).

The chosen coaching issue should be the one with the highest combination of impact and urgency. Each employee deserves to be regularly coached. Research shows that being ignored by a supervisor is an almost certain path to employee disengagement.

And while that same research shows that a strength focus is generally more effective than a weakness focus for promoting engagement, all employees need to be coached for a problem at some point in their careers. In those situations, the earlier and more clearly the concern can be discussed, the better.

The coaching conversation simply initiates the process. Again, the desired output is an agreed-to plan that both parties believe is reasonable and are committed to. Ensuring follow-up and accountability of that plan ultimately resides with the supervisor. Without it, the coaching conversation is simply a nice chat.

Following are three situations that I encountered with three different outcomes.

- “Dave” was a talented and experienced technician. He was quick with a smile and well-liked. I perceived a problem was developing in that he was getting a little too social. I’m a firm believer in statistics. If 30 percent of the time I observe someone talking at the water cooler, it’s because they spend 30 percent of their time at the water cooler.

I shared my concerns with Dave. Following some initial pushback, it was a relatively easy discussion. We had a sound working relationship, and Dave knew that I had his best interests at heart. He had enough self-awareness to realize that the mirror I was holding up was an accurate reflection. We agreed that having great relationships with teammates was important, but it could go too far and impact the team’s performance.

Dave made a conscious effort to modify his behavior. When a co-worker wanted to discuss the weekend’s

NASCAR race, Dave tactfully told him that he had to get something done and would catch up at lunch.

Dave went on to have a great career. Twenty-five years after our coaching conversation, Dave and his wife invited me to their 50th wedding anniversary.

- “Bill” was an engineer who appeared to be in over his head. Although he had been with the organization for almost a decade, the tasks he could independently handle were equivalent to those expected of an entry level employee. It was impacting the output of not only our team but also the organization since engineering was a key resource.

The coaching session with Bill was long and arduous. He insisted that my assessment was inaccurate and my expectations unreasonable. The following day he handed me his resignation letter.

A day later he requested his resignation letter back, stating, “Perhaps I was a bit rash.” I countered by stating that he had submitted it after sleeping on it and that it was in both his and the organization’s best interests that he get a new start with an organization where the expectations and his skills were a better fit.

- “Ray” was a machine operator with a habitual absentee problem. The union contract specified a rigorous escalation process (verbal warning, written warning, three-day suspension, termination). A clean record for a specified period reset the disciplinary process.

Ray was a master at gaming the system. Time and again, he would quickly escalate to a suspension, only to clean up his act for the required probationary period and restart the process. It was frustrating, but we dutifully coached and documented each absence and played by the rules.

Then one night Ray messed up. Perhaps he forgot where he was in the disciplinary sequence. Perhaps he had a legitimate excuse, but had squandered all his chances foolishly. He was promptly fired.

Our work was just beginning. The union was required to represent him through the arbitration process. Fortunately, we had well-documented records. We knew we were in good shape when the arbitrator began his ruling with, “If ever there is a hall of fame for absenteeism, Ray will be an initial inductee.”

Coaching problems is definitely not the fun part of managing people. Effectively accomplished, however, it results in one of three outcomes — improvement, resignation or termination. While all three situations resulted in some preparation stress, there certainly are no regrets looking back.

## RICK SAYS

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