

## Is Your Employee Struggling, Improving... Or Ready To Go?

By Liz Bywater, Ph.D.

Several years ago, I was asked to coach an executive taking on a new role, his most senior position to date. In launching our work, we had a conversation with his manager — the CEO of a large healthcare system — to discuss key success factors and potential risks.

As we spoke, it became clear that my client, Bill, had a personal challenge that would impact his ability to thrive in the new role. You see, Bill was inherently a warm, empathic, compassionate person. And while those traits are admirable and



a natural fit for the healthcare space, they are also a potential liability. In Bill's case, they could be an impediment to making tough decisions about how and when to let go of his poor performers. In fact, he had a track record of keeping people onboard despite insufficient performance, inability to keep up with changing demands, and problem behavior that disrupted the efficiency and morale of the organization.

Bill was a thoughtful leader and a very nice guy. But senior leaders sometimes have to make tough calls. They can't waste precious time, energy, and resources on employees who can't or won't come around.

Are you dealing with a staff member who is not performing, behaving, or adding value as a leader? Here are five steps you should take:

1. **Assess the situation.** Consider: How long has the problem been going on? Is it unusual behavior for this employee or reflective of a pattern? How impactful is the issue? Can it be fixed? Is it worth the effort?
2. **Set (or re-set) clear expectations.** Does this employee know precisely what success looks like — at this time, for future growth, and under changing circumstances? Have you been crystal clear about vision, strategy, and execution? Don't forget, even your top leaders require clarity if they are to succeed.
3. **Share substantial, real-time observations.** Don't wait for mid-year or year-end to provide actionable feedback on performance and leadership behavior. This should be part of the discussion on a consistent and timely basis.
4. **Give the employee an opportunity to improve.** Provide tools such as mentoring, training, and coaching. Decide, how much time will you allow for substantial improvement. What does "real" progress look like (as opposed to "best behavior" that will soon fade)?
5. **Be clear about your line in the sand.** Which behaviors are simply inexcusable? And how much time and energy are you willing to dedicate to this situation? Remember, time is your most valuable asset. Time spent trying to get a failing employee back on track is time you've lost for strategic endeavors, business development, and attending to your most creative, engaged, and productive people.

Bottom line: Occasional performance gaps may occur due to changing expectations, personal life disruptions, and ever-increasing workplace demands. But continual or progressive problems create unrelenting stress and significant distraction for any leader. If an employee repeatedly fails to meet expectations for performance, workplace behavior and/or overall leadership — despite clarity around what's expected, real-time feedback, and the tools for success — it is likely time to end the relationship. That will protect your time for real progress, innovation, and meaningful growth.

I hope you've enjoyed this edition of Dr. Liz on Leadership. Each month, I will share new ideas, tools and advice to help you thrive in today's ever-changing healthcare environment. Let me know what's top of mind and I'll answer your most pressing questions in future columns. Contact me at [liz@lizbywater.com](mailto:liz@lizbywater.com).

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