

The Two-Minute Challenge



Podcast transcript

My name is Bob Parks; I'm the Director for Training and Organizational Development here at UF and have had the privilege of working with leaders and managers across this campus for many years.

One of the hardest parts of a manager's job is dealing with employee performance problems. In these situations, many managers will either under-react or over-react – and often they will do both. We under-react when we don't speak directly to the employee about the issue – perhaps providing occasional feedback about the issue or making indirect comments – “late again, huh, Jim?” – and hoping the employee will understand that this is important to us and he or she needs to make a change. Often, our frustration will build until we are fed up. At that point, we over-react, giving feedback out of frustration and with less-than-constructive language ... and results. Emotions often run high in these situations.

To help avoid the under-react, over-react scenario, it often can be helpful for a manager to have a guide for the interaction, a tool to keep the conversation focused and constructive. The two-minute challenge, described in Media Partner's video “The Practical Coach,” is a tool that many managers have found very helpful in just these types of situations. The two-minute challenge has 5 simple steps:

- 1. State what you have observed**
- 2. Wait for a response**
- 3. Remind of the goal**
- 4. Ask for a specific solution**
- 5. Agree together**

Let's walk through each of these steps.

#1 – State what you've observed. “John, I want to talk to you about the reports that you are responsible for completing and sending to the vice president's office for review. I noticed that the most recent report came back with some corrections that needed to be made. This is the third time in a row that this has happened.” At this point, keep your comments focused on the specifics of the behavior or the performance. Resist the temptation to editorialize. Not, “John, you continue to be sloppy with these reports,” for example.

#2 – Wait for a response. This can lead to awkward silence. Still, wait for a response. This step is important for two reasons. First, and probably most important, you want this conversation to be a dialogue not a monologue. Waiting at this point is an early signal that you will be listening and not just lecturing. As the manager, you need the employee to take responsibility and we are all much less likely to do that when we are being lectured at. Second, you might learn something about the issue that you didn't know before. You might not learn something new, of course. Instead, you might hear the same excuses that you expected to hear, but it's important to create the space and possibility for genuine dialogue and shared problem-solving.

#3 – Remind the employee of the goal. “John, when we send those reports to the VP's office, we need to make sure that they are completely correct.” This is a particularly important step and one you may have to return to throughout the course of the conversation. One of the biggest challenges in these types of conversations is that they so easily get off track. Employees will often steer these conversations away from the actual performance issue, typically even without consciously realizing it. In fact, most of us do this when we are confronting a difficult issue that we'd prefer to avoid. “Why are you addressing this issue with me? I'm not the only person in this office who makes mistakes. You don't talk to anyone else!” We call these sidetracks because they actually distract from the conversation that really needs to happen, the conversation about the employee's performance. In our example, this isn't (and shouldn't be) a conversation about whether this manager addresses mistakes with everyone – that's a sidetrack. This should be a conversation about this employee's performance with respect to these reports. It's important to keep the specific performance goal in mind – and return to it when necessary – throughout the conversation.

#4 – Ask for a specific solution. After reminding the employee of the goal, the next step is to ask for a solution. “How can we make sure that when you send these reports to the VP's office they are completely correct?” Here, the emphasis needs to be on “ask.” Most managers already know what they think should happen at this

point; they just want the employee to do it. As we've mentioned, though, you want the employee to take responsibility for improvement and that's much more likely to happen if he or she has participated in identifying a solution. Just as with step #2, you might need to wait – even through some awkward silence – until the employee can start identifying some potential solutions for you to discuss together. Resist the temptation to jump in too quickly with your own solutions, even if he or she tells you, “I don't know, you're the manager...” Feel free to redirect more than once, if necessary. “I really want to know what you think you can do to make sure that when you send these reports to the VP's office they are completely correct.” This is a discussion, so you will both need to discuss together possible solutions and find one that is mutually acceptable. For example, “I'm too busy to get all of this done, we need to hire someone to help me complete the reports,” is unlikely to be a viable solution given the budget constraints in most areas. Also, be sure the solution is specific – not, “I'll take care of it,” or “I'll make sure it doesn't happen again.” The employee still hasn't told you anything specific that he or she will do differently. Real changes require specific solutions.

#5 – Agree together. We've all walked away from conversations thinking there was mutual agreement only to realize later that we were still on different pages about who was responsible for what. Clarify the agreed upon solution. “So, we agree that you will review the final numbers with Irma and ask another member of our team to proofread the reports before sending them, yes?” It is also helpful to clarify how you will follow up. “Let's meet in two weeks to see how it went and review the results.”

State, wait, remind, ask, and agree – these five steps can provide a structure to help guide a difficult performance conversation. They won't make the conversation any easier, but they can be very helpful in keeping both manager and employee focused on the performance issue at hand and the best ways to help the employee improve.