

The 2-Minute Challenge



A guide for a difficult coaching conversation

One of the most challenging aspects of a manager's job is having difficult conversations with employees about ongoing performance problems. Though challenging, these conversations are essential to being an effective coaching manager. These situations are difficult because they are often emotionally charged and can also quickly sidetrack (see the "Be Aware!" sidebar) away from the actual performance problem. When having this type of conversation, managers can benefit from having a guide. The two-minute challenge, described in Media Partner's video "The Practical Coach," is a tool that many managers have found helpful for guiding the conversation in a productive direction.

Why it matters

You cannot be a good coach if you are unwilling to have a difficult conversation with employees regarding ongoing performance problems. Understandably, most managers are uncomfortable with such conversations. The two-minute challenge provides a framework for having conversations about performance in the most productive way possible.

Six Steps in the Challenge

Step 1: State what you have observed

What is the performance issue? Be specific. Describe the behavior or performance problem. "Jane, I'm concerned that your most recent projects have fallen behind schedule." There is no need to editorialize too much at this point – keep focused on the behavior.

Step 2: Wait for a response

This step is important. You want this conversation to be a dialogue, not a one-way lecture from you. (One-way lectures usually feel good for the lecturer but rarely create buy-in on the part of the listener.) By waiting at this point, you signal to the employee that this is a dialogue and that you will be working together to find a solution.

Step 3: Remind of the goal

Remind the employee of the goal. “Jane, it’s important that our projects be completed on time.” Be clear about the desired performance outcome. Also, if the conversation gets off-track a bit, it may be necessary to remind the employee, again, of the desired performance.

Step 4: Ask for a specific solution

After clarifying the desired performance outcome or goal, it’s time to *ask* for a specific solution. “What steps can you take or what adjustments can you make to ensure that these projects are completed on time?” At this point, supervisors often know what they think the employee needs to do to improve. It’s important, however, that the manager resist the temptation to jump in with his or her own solution. First, ask the employee what he or she thinks. Employees are much more likely to embrace a solution they’ve helped develop. The solution should be specific and mutually acceptable. “I’ll take care of it,” is not a specific solution. “We need to hire another employee to help me finish the reports on time,” simply may not be an option. You both may need to talk through several different options to get to a specific, mutually acceptable approach. Remember, you don’t necessarily need to be flexible on the performance outcome, but at this stage it can help to be genuinely open to the employee’s ideas for improving his or her performance.

Step 5: Agree together

“So, we agree...” Unfortunately, we often think we’ve reached a shared understanding in a conversation only to find later that wasn’t the case. This step is very important for clarifying the agreement, ensuring shared understanding, and fostering accountability.

Step 6: Follow-up

Many supervisors are so relieved to be through with a difficult conversation that they simply want to stay away from the topic and/or person for some time afterwards. It is vital, though, that the supervisor follow up and provide feedback when the behavior or performance improves...or when it doesn't. Following up is essential to fostering continued performance improvement.

The two-minute challenge won't make a difficult conversation easy and it won't magically resolve performance problems, but it definitely helps to keep a difficult performance conversation focused and productive.

Be Aware!

One of the most common challenges with having a difficult performance conversation is facing sidetracks. What are sidetracks? The normal defense mechanisms that we all use to avoid a difficult topic. Sidetracks can vary, but their common feature is that they shift the conversation away from the employee's performance. Below are some common examples:

--**Attack** ("You come in late too. How come it's OK for you to come in late, but not me!?") Most supervisors would want to defend themselves—explaining that they haven't been late or why there are good reasons for their tardiness. The supervisor's tardiness is not the issue at hand, however. The issue is the employee's tardiness. Discussing the supervisor's tardiness sidetracks away from the real focus.

--**Stall** ("I'm so sorry, it won't happen again!") This is a stall because no specific solution has been proposed.

--**Self-inflicted wound** ("I just can't seem to do anything right. I've tried so hard and still I fail. Plus, I've been so stressed lately.") After an employee is so hard on herself or himself, most supervisors want to be nice. Again, however, the supervisor and employee have not yet identified a specific solution.

--**Guilt trip** ("You don't ever bring this up with other employees. Why are you picking on me?") It's important to treat all employees fairly. If the behavior is a problem for one person, it should be a problem for another. Still, this conversation needs to stay focused on this particular employee's behavior, not the behavior of others.

The common effect of sidetracks is that they – often subtly – shift the conversation away from an actual discussion of the performance issue and how to improve the performance. In these cases, it's important for the supervisor to return to steps 3 and 4 (remind of the goal and ask for a specific solution) to keep the conversation focused on specific ways to help the employee improve.