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Staff Matters: When Should We Use a Performance Improvement Plan?

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By Jodi Schafer, SPHR, SHRM-SCP
HRM Services

When Should We Use a Performance Improvement Plan?

Question: We've had several employee issues come up recently, such as not completing work consistently or with quality, and also behaviors that

go against policies in our employee handbook (such as attendance, being on personal calls too much at work, etc.). We're trying to address these issues while also giving the employee an opportunity to improve. We have a form called a Performance Improvement Plan, but I've never used one before and not sure if it applies to all these situations. Can you please help me understand when to use, or not use, a PIP?

Answer: Let's first start by better defining what a Performance Improvement Plan, or PIP, is. A performance improvement plan is a document that communicates with an employee their specific job-related challenges as related to the expected result/performance outcomes, and what training and resources will be available to support the employee as they work towards improvement. The PIP also identifies potential consequences if improvement does not occur to the level indicated and/or within the timeframe provided. While this documentation will be helpful should termination result in the future, that is not the primary goal of a PIP. Instead, the intended outcome is employee development and performance improvement, as the name indicates.

When is using a PIP appropriate? Typically, PIPs are used for performance/ability-related deficiencies that simple coaching hasn't corrected. Ideally, the supervisor has already brought the problem to the employee's attention verbally to understand more about what might be causing the issue. If the supervisor believes there may be a skill or capacity weakness, a PIP could be a great way to formally document the issue, outline the next steps that the employee will take, and identify key metrics and timelines to assess if improvements are occurring.

When would a PIP not be appropriate? A performance

improvement plan would not be appropriate if the issue you are addressing has no development component — for example, using TV streaming services on the practice's computer during work hours. In this case, you could document a conversation with the employee and clarify that the behavior is a policy violation and is unacceptable. If the behavior occurs again, you move ahead with the identified consequence, which could include termination.

This brings me to another situation where a PIP would not be appropriate. If the supervisor has already decided that they are ready to terminate the employee, then putting a PIP in place creates false hope and delays the inevitable. Finally, if the issue at hand is so severe that you don't want to provide the employee an opportunity to change, then a PIP is not appropriate. Examples of this might include if an employee acted very aggressively toward another employee, or if they exhibited behaviors that constituted harassment, according to your policies. Both of those instances are examples of behavior issues or policy violations vs. performance issues, and thus would be more conducive to corrective action rather than a PIP.

In summary, you want to choose the right communication tool to fit the circumstances. Start by first diagnosing the type of issue the employee is experiencing. Then, determine if there is a pattern to what you are seeing, taking into consideration how severe the issue is and if there is any indication that the employee has the capacity to change. The answers to these questions will help you determine your next steps and whether a PIP is an appropriate tool to use, or whether coaching or corrective action will be more effective. ●

Have a human resources question? Email the MDA's Brandy Ryan at bryan@michigandental.org.

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