

## Counseling a Staff Member



### In a Nutshell

If I were Jeremy Shockey's coach, I'd counsel him. The photo above is of Shockey at the end of a game that his team, the New York Giants, lost on October 28. Before the game he made derogatory comments to the media about their opponents. Misconduct like that warrants counseling.

While coaching is appropriate for employees deficient in knowledge or skills, counseling is appropriate for misconduct or a lack of motivation. When counseling employees, it's important to both (1) listen to what the employee has to say, and (2) uphold standards.

When a valued employee is having problems with his or her attitude, motivation or personal affairs, managerial counseling can often guide them to a solution. Furthermore, even when managerial counseling is not sufficient for dealing with the problem, it's a good precursor to (a) referral to professional counseling or (b) termination.

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### Why I'd Counsel Shockey, and How

Jeremy Shockey is a promising rookie football player for the New York Giants of the National Football League. Prior to the Giants' game against the Philadelphia Eagles on October 28, Shockey had said that some of the Philadelphia players were overrated. Shockey probably made that comment because he was more focused on getting publicity for himself or motivating himself than on doing what's best for the team. I assume that he knew that the Giants don't want their players saying things to inflame opponents. He knew he shouldn't have done it, but he did it. Thus, his comments were a form of misconduct.

If I were the coach of the Giants, I would invite Shockey into my office to counsel him for his misconduct. I would go back over the team's philosophy regarding public communication, and explain why I didn't think his comments were consistent with that policy. Shockey might argue that he thought his comments were constructive because they helped him and his teammates to get motivated. I would use my active listening and constructive communication skills to show him that I heard his point of view even though I didn't completely agree with it. It's good for Shockey to get himself and his teammates motivated (i.e., I'd "validate" that), but there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to do boost motivation. I would tell him what I expected from him in the future and ask him whether he understood and was willing to cooperate. If not, I wouldn't play him until he changed his attitude. If he was willing to cooperate, I would conclude the meeting by letting him know (a) that the episode was forgivable, but (b) what the consequences of repeating the behavior would be. Repeated

episodes of making derogatory comments in the media about opponents would affect my willingness to put him in the game. Repeated misconduct would also decrease his value to the team, which would have an impact on the next round of contract negotiations he had with the team.

Derogatory comments, other types of misconduct, and a lack of motivation are probably about as common in business organizations as they are in athletics. When those things occur, managers who listen, show that they care, and still uphold standards can simultaneously improve performance and build stronger relationships.

### **You Have to Really Care and Really Listen**

I don't think you can counsel your employees effectively if you don't truly care about them, because effective counseling can be hard work. A major way in which human resources differ from the other resources you control as a manager is that humans have emotions. We profit from the positive emotions like excitement and inspiration, but we also have to accept and manage effectively the negative emotions such as anger, frustration, worry and arrogance. It takes work to deal with the negative side of employees' emotions. Managerial counseling requires [listening effectively](#) and [constructive communication](#). It's a lot easier to just be a hard-nosed, "my-way-or-the-highway" manager. But, managers who can counsel their employees get the most out of them in difficult circumstances.

### **Counseling Doesn't Mean Lowering Standards!**

Whether you are counseling or coaching in response to poor performance, the goal is the same--to get that poorly performing employee's performance back up to standards (or back into conformance with the rules). I know that every now and then you may come across a subordinate who is manipulative or full of malarkey. I still think that unless those employees have done something that justifies immediate termination, the best way to deal with them is to listen to their story at least once. Listening to their story and validating their feelings doesn't mean that you accept their poor performance or misconduct. After you've listened to their story and empathized, come up with a plan for improving performance. That's always the goal.

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### **Managers Aren't Therapists**

I strongly recommend that you avoid asking pointed questions or making assumptions about your employees' personal lives. Legally and ethically, employees have a variety of privacy rights. When counseling, focus on the work-related problem. The work-related problem is often (perhaps usually) the symptom of a personal problem, but only discuss the personal issues if the employee you're counseling raises them, and refer the employee to professional counseling for anything of a serious nature. For example, here's what I'm suggesting.

#### **Appropriate:**

*You seem distracted at work and your productivity has fallen off. I really need you to be more productive. Is there anything I can help you with?*

#### **Inappropriate:**

*Are you having marital problems?*

or

*I think your drinking in the evenings is interfering with your job performance.*

You can only comment on what you observe employees actually doing or the results they achieve. Making assumptions about personal problems is very risky and sometimes unfair. For instance, diabetics have occasionally been mistaken for alcoholics. You wouldn't want to make a mistake like that!

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### **Practicing This Management Skill**

#### **Prior to meeting with the employee ...**

1. Clarify exactly what the work-related problem is. Be as specific and task-related as possible.

2. Determine what you think the cause is.
  - o If it's due to motivation, attitude or emotions, counseling is appropriate.
  - o If it's due to a lack of knowledge or skill, counseling is unnecessary and coaching is appropriate.
3. Know whether and how you can refer employees to your firm's employee assistance program (EAP) or other resources for help with personal problems.

### When meeting with the employee ...

1. Be pleasant and put the employee at ease as much as possible under the circumstances.
2. Describe the behaviors or aspects of job performance that are insufficient or unacceptable.
3. Ask the employee what he or she thinks is causing the problem.
4. Listen actively and communicate supportively.
5. Once the employee has had time to tell his or her story, ask the employee how he or she will correct the performance problem.
  - o Tell the employee how to get help with "any personal problems that might affect your job performance." But, be careful about making assumptions or asking questions about their personal problems.
6. Help the employee make a realistic plan to solve the problem.
7. If the problem is important, jointly create and sign an FOSA agreement.
  - o **Facts:** Give a factual account of the performance or behavior.
  - o **Objectives:** Specifically explain how the employee's behavior will need to improve and specify a time frame.
  - o **Solutions:** Document how the employee plans to solve the problem.
  - o **Actions:** Describe the consequences for not achieving the objective.
8. Plan a follow-up meeting to assess whether the FOSA agreement's objectives were met.
9. Explain that a follow-up report will be attached to the FOSA, so he or she will get credit for correcting the problem.
10. Have the follow-up meeting, and deliver the agreed upon consequences.

### In Summary ...

When employees engage in misconduct or show a lack of motivation, counseling is warranted. To counsel employees effectively, it's important to both (a) show that you are listening and that you care and also (b) uphold standards for conduct and productivity. Most of us find that a tricky balance, but the best managers pull it off.

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### Sources

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### About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

*LeaderLetter* is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

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## E-mail Your Comments

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **Every week, I learn something new from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

## A Good, Clean Joke

Meditate on These

- Drink 'til he's cute, but stop before the wedding
- Eagles may soar, but weasels don't get sucked into jet engines
- The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese
- Never try to date a psychic, she'll leave before you meet
- Intend to live forever ... so far, so good
- Love defenseless animals, especially in a good gravy
- Have a mind like a steel trap ... rusty and illegal in 37 states
- The only substitute for good manners is fast reflexes
- Beauty is in the eye of the beer holder
- 24 hours in a day ... 24 beers in a case ... coincidence?
- Many people quit looking for work when they find a job
- Everyone has a photographic memory ... some don't have film
- If you choke a smurf, what color does it turn?
- Who is General Failure and why is he reading my hard disk?
- What happens if you get scared half to death twice?
- If you can't repair your brakes, make your horn louder
- Shin: a device for finding furniture in the dark
- Join the Army, meet interesting people, kill them
- Why do psychics have to ask you for your name?
- For Sale: Parachute. Only used once, never opened, small stain
- OK, so what's the speed of dark?
- Corduroy pillows make headlines
- Black holes are where God divided by zero
- All those who believe in psycho kinesis will raise your hand

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