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## UNDERPERFORMING EMPLOYEES

“One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel.”

It might seem cliché, but science supports the idea behind this old saying when considering teams such as golf course maintenance staffs. Research by the Gallup Organization shows the clear relationship between (a) increased productivity, reduced turnover and less absenteeism, and (b) answering “yes” to the question: Are my associates or fellow employees committed to doing quality work?

About one in three of the more than two million in the Gallup database answered “yes” to this question. However, their answer is highly sensitive to one or more rotten apples among their fellow employees. When employees perceive the presence of one or more poor performers, the proportion answering “yes” falls to one in five. Conversely, in the absence of rotten apples, one half answer “yes.”

This and other research support the link between the presence of one or more laggards and employee motivation/performance. This research makes a lot of sense in the context of fairness. With one or more rotten apples, employees question the fairness of their hard work when others are allowed to slide by.

The message for superintendent as supervisors is clear: begin working with underperforming employees immediately and continue until the poor performance issue is resolved. Three recommended steps are: coaching, negative feedback, and discipline and discharge.

### COACHING

When speaking to fellow managers, a manager said, “When I analyze employee performance problems, 90 percent of them result from something I did.” The coaching in this step focuses on redirecting employee behavior rather than reprimanding the employee. It’s natural to blame poor performance on employee motivation, focus, effort and

concentration rather than factors beyond employee control such as lack of clarity, insufficient training, inadequate confidence and unusual conditions.

In this step, observe the employee, analyze his behavior or performance, and talk to him to identify the barriers to satisfactory performance. Then, use positive feedback to reinforce positive behavior and good performance and provide the needed training, support, resources and encouragement to redirect the employee to use behaviors, practices and procedures that result in satisfactory performance. Here’s an example:

Garth is a new employee whose performance was acceptable initially. Although he seemed motivated, he failed to pick up the pace of task achievement satisfactorily and started to regress. Performance wasn’t adequate, and other employees noticed. As the superintendent observed Garth, he noticed a pattern of hesitation during task completion. When talking with Garth, the superintendent determined the hesitation resulted from insufficient confidence in his ability to complete the tasks correctly. Garth hadn’t mastered the tasks to the degree necessary. By increasing positive feedback where appropriate, providing retraining and temporarily reducing the number of tasks assigned, Garth’s performance picked up. In this situation, a reprimand likely would have shattered Garth’s confidence, resulting in even poorer performance.

### NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

As it becomes clear an employee’s energy, focus, concentration, effort and motivation is the cause of the poor performance, a superintendent should shift from redirecting to providing negative feedback. The employee still might not accept that he’s the cause of the unacceptable performance. To the degree possible, it’s to a superintendent’s advantage to convince the employee his effort, energy, etc., is the problem. Asking questions rather than telling the

employee what to do is often helpful.

We normally think of negative feedback as a reprimand. Instead, I encourage you to think of it as providing the employee a choice: correct the behavior and/or performance issues or incur a specified consequence.

Specifying the appropriate consequence is a challenge; however, without a specific consequence, you’re not providing effective negative feedback. The consequence must include sufficient discomfort to cause the needed change in behavior.

### DISCIPLINE AND DISCHARGE

When negative feedback appears to be insufficient, consider a formal discipline and discharge procedure. Check on the rules and procedures for discipline and discharge at your course. The important characteristics of any process include:

- The purpose is employee success. Termination is a potential outcome but not the purpose of the process.
- Every step is based on the employee (not the supervisor) making the choice to perform or incur the consequence including termination.
- The process must be fair, including the presence of clear consequences (with the consequences becoming increasingly uncomfortable), and detailed documentation of the performance and consequences.

The common steps in a discipline and discharge procedure are:

- Provide a verbal reminder that’s also recorded in writing in the employee file;
- Provide a written reminder that’s also delivered verbally;
- A suspension, which is sometimes called a decision-making leave day. The employee is directed to spend the time deciding whether he wishes to return and perform satisfactorily or seek other employment (be discharged). I’ve seen excellent results from the use of suspensions; and
- The employee chooses to terminate employment rather than perform.

The bottom line is that, at the first sign of performance problems, a good manager will begin coaching and redirecting. **GCI**