

PERFORMANCE COUNSELING

A Cooperative Approach to Behavior Modification

BY ALICIA IHNKEN

Scene 1: Dispatchers in your comm center have started to complain that “Jerry” has been coming in late “a lot.” You’ve documented three days in the past week when he was 10 minutes or later to start his shift, leaving the comm center short-staffed during critical shift changes. As his supervisor, you need to take action. But what’s the best approach to ensure positive change?

Scene 2: A call review reveals that “Sue” is slow to answer incoming calls, picking up after the fifth ring approximately 40% of the time instead of no later than the third ring as your policy mandates. How can you get Sue to change her behavior?

New hires and seasoned employees have the potential to make mistakes. As a trainer or supervisor, you need to know how to deal with these mistakes and help employees improve their performance. *One technique you can use:* performance counseling. If done correctly, counseling can effect positive change and ensure a positive outcome for the employee and the comm center.

WHAT IS COUNSELING?

If an employee is not performing up to expectation and guidelines, counseling is an effective form of intervention. Counseling provides direction or advice with regard to a decision or course of action. The goal is to correct unacceptable or incorrect behavior. Counseling may also be used as a motivational tool to assist the trainee or employee in their professional growth. Just as a QA/QI

program is not intended to be used as punishment, counseling should be part of the same growth process.

Although the counseling session itself is not intended to be punishment, discipline or remedial training may result from the employee’s wrong actions or incorrect behavior and can be introduced during the counseling session. Counseling should be positive and corrective and avoid opinions.

Implementing a successful counseling program requires:

- Up-to-date policies and procedures that are well written and easily understood;
- A formal training program on these policies and procedures;
- A fair, legal disciplinary system;
- An objective method of identifying weaknesses and behavioral problems;
- Dedicated individuals who can recognize problem behaviors and are willing to work to correct them; and
- Knowing when to let go.

POLICIES & PROCEDURES

First, let’s discuss the role of policies and procedures. It isn’t enough to have a dusty book in the communications center to refer to when something goes wrong. Policies should cover important aspects of the center’s operations, with supporting procedures regarding topics as diverse as what constitutes tardiness and its consequences, how to handle an armed robbery in progress and everything in between.

Your policies and procedures manual should be a living document that can change and grow as the organization changes and grows. W. Ann “Winnie” Maggiore, JD, NREMT-P, an attorney in Albuquerque, N.M., says, “A policy is the first thing a plaintiff’s attorney looks for. So have only the policies you need, and always leave room for the dispatcher to exercise judgment.” The comm center manual should be separate from that of any other division (i.e., patrol, fire-rescue). Information must be stated clearly and be readily understood. Procedures should not be open to interpretation or subject to the whims of the supervisor or employee.

Next, your center should have an established training program. Telecommunicators must receive initial training in all aspects of the job. The training must be sufficient for employees to know exactly what is expected of them. If a policy or procedure changes, conduct supplemental training for all staff members. You can use a variety of methods, such as quizzes or scenario-based discussions, to ensure employees have an understanding of current policies and procedures. All such training should be documented in an employee’s training file. Current policy and procedure guidelines must be in place and accessible to employees at all times.

An appropriate and fair disciplinary system must also be in place. If employees believe others have gotten away with inappropriate behavior or there is “nothing” the supervisor or manager can do about a problem, inappropriate

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behavior will continue and possibly get worse. If employees know that a system is in place and that it's followed, they'll be less likely to take inappropriate actions. Consider incorporating a progressive discipline system into your employee handbook and implementing it in conjunction with counseling. Progressive discipline systems typically impose more severe penalties each time discipline is necessary. *Possible incremental discipline:* counseling, an oral reprimand, suspension without pay, reduction of pay within a class, demotion to a lower classification and, ultimately, termination. Employees should have the right to respond to the discipline imposed. *Remember:* Before implementing any discipline system, consult your agency's attorney.

Once employees have a demonstrated understanding of what is expected of them and what will happen if they fail to meet those expectations, identifying inappropriate behavior is easier. All behavior issues must be objectively identified and documented. Departments with quality assurance and improvement programs in place will find it even easier to identify problem areas and correct them early. Another tool to help identify problems for individuals still in training—who are most likely to make mistakes—is a daily observational report (DOR). *Objectivity* is the key. There's no room for opinion in the counseling process. Only specific information about observed, factual behavior of the trainee or employee should be documented and considered during the counseling process (see sidebar, right).

Trainers and supervisors must know the rules and documentation methods better than anyone else. There is no room for complacency when one is in the position of critiquing another's behavior. Once these factors are in place, the evaluator will be able to conduct performance appraisals correctly and counseling will be more effective.

WHO SHOULD COUNSEL?

During training, it is the trainer's responsibility to provide the tools necessary for their

trainee's success and to identify problem areas for correction. Thus, in the training environment, the trainer should be the counselor and must themselves be trained in counseling techniques. Trainers should be able to rely on comments and documentation provided on DORs.

Employees who are out of training should be counseled by their supervisor. Supervisors should be able to rely on objective information and documentation contained in performance evaluations. If

process. Weekly sessions are not excessive, and counseling can be a part of every shift if warranted by the employee's performance. For employees who have completed their initial training, counseling can take place during the time that the supervisor discusses the performance evaluation with the employee. Specific problems can also be addressed outside of the regular evaluation schedule. The key, again, is to make sure the behavior is documented objectively and accurately.

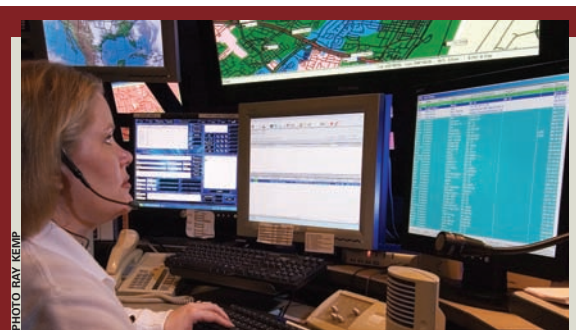


PHOTO: RAY KEIMP

Objective vs. Subjective Statements

Objective statements are based on facts and observed behavior. Examples include:

- Martha answered the phone within the required three rings every time during training.
- Jerry was five minutes late today.
- Susan stated she was never shown the following functions in CAD: [List functions.]
- Mark did not respond to a call for backup over the radio. The trainer stepped in.
- Cheryl did not throw her trash away until the trainer reminded her to do so.

Subjective statements are open to interpretation.

Examples include:

- Martha was quick on the draw when answering the phone.
- Jerry is lazy.
- Susan consistently complains that she has never seen certain functions in CAD.
- Mark cannot grasp the concept of officer safety.
- Cheryl is a messy worker.

documentation is subjective (based on opinion), it will be open to interpretation and, therefore, not a valuable or reliable source of information.

WHEN SHOULD COUNSELING OCCUR?

Counseling does not need to be a grand affair. It should be a routine occurrence built into the training matrix. All staff members should be familiar with the

HOW SHOULD COUNSELING BE CONDUCTED?

Atmosphere: It's important to conduct counseling in a comfortable, private atmosphere. Sitting at a console at the end of shift change while people are moving about and making noise is not the ideal place for counseling. A quiet room with good lighting, possibly an office or training room, is more conducive to the process. This is not the time to try and intimidate an employee. Both parties should be seated at eye level with each other. A table or desk may separate the parties and provide a workspace to examine documents or other materials. The space should be clean and uncluttered to facilitate concentration and allow the parties to focus on the matter at hand.

No matter how objectively or positively the trainer or supervisor approaches a counseling session, the counselor cannot control the employee's actions. The potential for something to go wrong always exists. So make sure there's an escape route. If the employee shows any signs of aggressiveness, nothing should be able to prevent the counselor from leaving the room or calling for help. This may sound

extreme, but measures should be taken to ensure the safety of both parties.

Agenda: Once the groundwork is laid, it's time to consider the counseling session itself. Set a clear agenda that describes what will actually happen during the counseling session and allot a time frame for the session. Counselors must be fully prepared and allow enough time to address the issue at hand. The employee should have an understanding of what's going to take place and

how. Everything to be discussed during the counseling session should be put in writing.

Many things must take place during a counseling session. Although it may seem counterintuitive, counseling sessions should be positive—even sessions addressing less-than-acceptable behavior. The counselor should have clear, set goals and remedies in mind to correct the problem behavior. That said, a critical factor in achieving a positive outcome is ensuring the party being counseled has input in the solution. That gives the employee a sense of ownership and makes it more likely that they'll correct their behavior.

Begin the session by making sure the other party understands the goal. Adults know when something bad is coming, so get to the point without beating around the bush. Focus on behavior and performance rather than on the person. Don't compare the employee with other telecommunicators, only with standards. Don't apologize or blame someone else for initiating the counseling session. Do describe the unacceptable behavior or incident. Do outline steps that will be taken to address the problem.

The typical method of delivering less-than-satisfactory news is to relate good news first followed by a transition word like "but" or "however" and then state the bad news. Example: "Jerry, I know you're usually on time to work, but lately you've been coming in later and later." With this approach, the person being counseled will most likely ignore everything that came before the transitional word, focusing on the negative, and in this case subjective, statement, "... you've been coming in later and later."

An alternative is to incorporate a possible solution with the explanation of the problem. *Example:* "Jerry, you're usually on time for work, and I'd like your help in addressing a recent change I've noticed. You've been more than 10 minutes late four times in the past two weeks, and this behavior is affecting the operations of the comm center. ..." In this example, the word *and* suggests change in a positive light. Rather than an ultimatum, the statement is an invitation for the employee to take ownership of the problem and be part of the solution, creating an air of cooperation and setting the stage for improvement. It suggests building up rather than tearing down or ridicule. Although this may seem like a

subtle change, it can make a big impact on the progression of a counseling session and subsequent change in behavior.

After the problem behavior is addressed, the employee should be given the opportunity to state their version of the situation, including any perceptions that differ. The counselor should use active listening techniques, remain focused and try to understand the other's point of view. The counselor should not interrupt, but listen to all the other party has to say.

After both sides have stated their case, a sort of negotiation can begin. This should be led by the counselor, and the employee's input should be considered seriously. When all these steps are taken, the employee will feel they are part of the decision process and in control of their own destiny. A feeling of control is vital to adults and creates a sense of intrinsic motivation to make positive changes. When counseling is done properly, there should be positive reinforcement, positive changes in behavior and faster

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progression through training.

Time may be included for the employee to bring up any additional questions or concerns they have, and the counselor can document these and follow up at a later date. A solution may seem readily apparent, but time and care should be taken when addressing new employee or trainee issues. This counseling session may not be the most appropriate time and forum to solve these additional issues. Follow through is essential, however. So be sure to document concerns and connect with the employee later, even if it's just to tell the individual you're still working on an issue.

WHEN COUNSELING DOESN'T WORK

When counseling is not done properly, it can result in damage to intrinsic motivation. There will be little or no resolution of

problems or modification of behavior and performance. Poor counseling can result in a continuing degradation and possibly a downward spiral: Poor counseling leads to additional negative behavior, which leads to more improper counseling.

Even when counseling is done properly, it may not be effective. In the event behaviors are not corrected through counseling, additional discipline may be necessary. There may come a point at which both parties decide there is nothing left to do. If all documentation is in order and disciplinary steps are followed correctly, there may be no other choice but termination.

Letting an employee go may be difficult, but if the individual's performance is not acceptable and they've been given suffi-

RESOURCES ~

- *How to Develop and Maintain a Public Safety Communications Standard Operating Procedures Manual*: APCO Policy and Procedure CD: Available at http://apointl.com/institute/products_publications.htm.
- *Communications Training Officer Course Text*: Available at <http://apointl.com/institute/training.htm>.
- *Counseling Skills for Supervisors*: APCO Training in a Box Series: Available at http://apointl.com/institute/products_publications.htm.
- *Expectations*: Evaluation Software—Released by the APCO Institute, this tool greatly simplifies the evaluation process. The software allows for evaluations, as well as daily observation reports, to be standardized and managed. A color-coded charting feature allows trainers and supervisors to track trainee/employee performance. The incorporated spell check feature enhances written reports. A joint offering from APCO Institute and Advanced Systems Technology Inc., *Expectations* is available at www.astcorp.com/expectations.

cient chances to reform, there may be no other alternative. A clear understanding of requirements and disciplinary methods, proper documentation and objectivity are essential to achieving a positive outcome.

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▶ CDE #22395 EXAM: PERFORMANCE COUNSELING ~

1. **Objectivity is based on:**
 - a. Fact
 - b. Opinion
 - c. Criticism
 - d. Interpretation
2. **When counseling an employee about inappropriate behavior, the counselor should refrain from using which of the following words?**
 - a. And
 - b. In addition
 - c. But
 - d. Because
3. **The employee should have a part in developing a solution to problem behavior because:**
 - a. The employee is on probation.
 - b. The employee has more power than the counselor.
 - c. The employee needs a sense of ownership in the solution.
 - d. The employee has better counseling skills.
4. **The effects of improper counseling can include which one of the following?**
 - a. Employees gaining a sense of ownership
 - b. A boost to internal motivation
 - c. No resolution to the problem
 - d. An upward spiral
5. **One purpose of counseling is to:**
 - a. Protect the agency from any liability.
 - b. Relieve the employee of any responsibility.
 - c. Present the impression that you care.
 - d. Help resolve problems.
6. **A counselor should try to:**
 - a. Impose their own moral judgment on the employee.
 - b. Remain unbiased no matter what problem is presented.
 - c. Find out as much information as possible about the employee's personal life.
 - d. Keep the counseling session as short as possible.
7. **Counseling should take place:**
 - a. With all employees present.
 - b. Behind closed doors.
 - c. In a very large room.
 - d. With all supervisors present.
8. **To be effective, a counseling session:**
 - a. Should have no set plan of action.
 - b. Should punish the employee.
 - c. Should be properly documented.
 - d. Should be recorded on a tape recorder.
9. **The agenda for a counseling session should be set up like which of the following?**
 - a. Counselor presents issue, employee presents their perception of the issue, and a solution is negotiated.
 - b. Counselor presents solution, employee presents their perception, and there is no negotiation.
 - c. Employee presents issue, counselor presents their perception, and counselor presents solution.
 - d. Employee presents issue, counselor presents their perception, and a solution is negotiated.
10. **If the first counseling session is not effective, the counselor should:**
 - a. Recommend the employee be terminated.
 - b. Follow a set course of disciplinary action.
 - c. Try another counseling session.
 - d. Wait and see what happens.

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