

---

---

# The Mathis Group's Messenger

---

Vol. 2 No. 1

January, 2004

---

## Writing Action Plans That Really Get Action

By Dr. Keith Mathis

Action plans are developed to provide employees with precise guidelines for changing their performance. Unfortunately, it is common for action plans to be written by supervisors with little thought or planning. Every action plan should give precise steps to improve the employee's behavior and work habits. Instead of doing this, mean managers have a one size fits all action plan mentality. The following suggestions will help you be proactive in writing more positive and precise action plans.

### 1. Make action plans as positive as possible

Action plans are a powerful tool to be used to mentor, coach, and correct workers. You should make every effort to create an action plan that will enhance specific skills in the employee and give precise action steps.

#### *Use the plan for positive development.*

Action plans can be focused toward making good skills better or developing core competencies in the person who lacks necessary skills. Action plans are typically necessary when a problem situation has developed over time and reaches the point that is must be addressed. For this reason, people often think that action plans are only for bad employees or those who are in trouble. Action plans should be used with all employees who need a focused approach in their development process.

#### *Stay balanced by discussing both positive and negative behaviors in each meeting.*

It is easy to notice all the areas in which an employee is not achieving a high level of proficiency. However, the employee needs a great deal of encouragement when he or she is hearing about areas that need improvement. Without encouragement the employee's behavior will change at a snail's pace, and in some instances, it will deteriorate. When only the negative traits of the worker are repeatedly pointed out, the employee can become defeated and feel he or she is not good enough to reach the desired level of competency.

#### *Help the employee feel supported not attacked.*

Providing a balanced assessment of positive and negative skills will help the worker understand that the true motivation for the plan is to develop and to expand his or her potential and value to the organization. This understanding is important because it will increase the probability that the employee will continue to add new skills over time.

### 2. Specify what behavior and events lead up to the need for an action plan

Detail, detail, detail is a motto that will save you problems down the road. You must detail the events and behaviors you expect if you want any degree of certainty that the new direction is understood clearly and embraced fully by the worker.

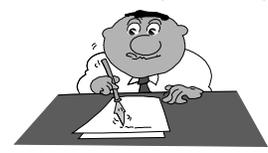
#### *Detail all the events and actions.*

Giving the background and the implications of the events that lead to the action plan will help the employee understand the significance and the magnitude of the situation. When a supervisor only focuses on a limited number of recent incidents, it may appear that the employee is being put on an action plan prematurely. When the employee can make the case that the corrective action was taken prematurely, the supervisor runs the risk of having an arbitration board or a court system side with the employee.

One way supervisors can reduce this risk is to build a strong historical case for all action plans and attach copies of all documentation. This not only builds your case for the future, but it also keeps the employee focused on exactly what he or she did in the way of performance or behavior that did not meet your approval.

#### *Detail all the behaviors that must be changed.*

Success goes up when you list the specific unwanted behavior along with the replacement behavior. This takes the guessing out of it and promotes clear understanding. Writing down desired behaviors allows you to be precise about what needs to be changed. Each inadequate or inappropriate behavior should have a corresponding plan designed to correct it.



(continued on page 2 Writing Action Plans)

*Every step toward improvement builds  
the energy that contributes to a  
winning mentality.  
James M. Costello*

# The Mathis Group's Messenger

(continued from page 1 *Writing Action Plans*)

### 3. Have your first meeting within a few days of developing the action plan

Setting up action plans might be routine for the supervisor; yet, it is anything but routine for most employees. We must have multiple meetings to give feedback and encouragement. To elevate the employee's performance level, we must be patient and invest the necessary time to coach or mentor him or her to the place of permanent change.

You might wonder why you need to have your first meeting soon after the action plan is presented. There are three basic reasons:

#### ***Setting up the meeting early allows you to make sure the employee understands.***

Some managers want their first meeting several weeks down the road so that the employee has time to change. These managers mean well, but you must realize that many employees are confused about their action plan. For a number of self-image and emotional reasons, many employees will not ask questions during the first confrontation.

If you do not meet with the employee within a few days of setting up the plan, it is possible you will waste strategic time they could be using to change the most important behaviors. Setting up the first meeting within a week helps insure that employees thoroughly understand which behaviors need to be changed and how they should be modified.

#### ***Setting up the meeting demonstrates urgency.***

Workers can change, but the change is more likely to be lasting if they feel a sense of urgency about the situation, which is critical to the action plan's success. You want the employee to feel the urgency and move toward behavioral or performance changes. If you wait several weeks to have your first meeting, this sense of urgency is likely to be lost.

#### ***Setting up the meeting helps mend the relationship if it is broken.***

Having a meeting the first week is a major step toward reestablishing the relationship between the supervisor and the employee. Reestablishing the relationship is needed to build confidence in the worker and increase the momentum for making the changes.

A good supervisor does not want employees to feel the boss is out to get them. You want employees to understand you dislike their performance or behavior, but your feelings are not personal. Many employers will make drastic changes if the relationship is reestablished and enhanced.

### 4. Make check-ups positive in nature

Each checkup with the employee needs to be positive. Because employees dread the process, make the experience encouraging as possible. This will produce three primary benefits.

#### ***Positive checkups build self-esteem.***

When employees are disciplined, they often become depressed and lose self-esteem. In some cases, their performance will actually grow worse because all the focus is on the negative.

You want the self-esteem of workers to become increasingly healthy and to seek a positive improvement in performance. For that reason, you want to be an encourager during the meetings. To encourage employees, doesn't hesitate to discuss the bad, but put it in the best light possible and focus most of your time and attention on the positive outcomes you and the employee are both seeking.

#### ***Positive checkups set the tone.***

Every supervisor should desire to set the proper tone for his or her employees. This means that employees understand what will be discussed and the order in which it will be addressed. They should understand that you are holding them accountable for change but that you will be fair throughout the process.

#### ***Positive checkups reduce employee fear about meetings.***

Too often, employees dread meeting with the boss. They think the meeting will inevitably focus on all the bad they have done with little praise for the areas that are starting to change. We must overcome this image and work to balance the meeting with both good and bad.

Giving balance does not mean that 50% of the time is given to discussing the good and 50% of the time is given to discussing the bad. It means you make a special effort to notice the positive changes as well as discuss those areas in which little or no progress is being made. Don't fail to celebrate progress along the way to overall improvement.



Check out our exciting  
courses!!

- Effective Performance Appraisals***
- Mentoring, Coaching, and Counseling***

Contact The Mathis Group today to receive their catalog of complete course listings or to discuss your customized onsite seminar.

#### **The Mathis Group, Inc.**

Dr. Keith Mathis  
106 Lakeview Woods  
Eureka, MO 63025  
1-800-224-3731  
636/938-5292 voice/fax  
GSA Contractor- GS10F0383M  
kmathis@ix.netcom.com  
www.keithmathis.com