Executive Summary

Optimum employee performance is an important objective of all mission-driven organizations. Equipping employees with the right tools and training is rarely enough; providing good supervisory feedback is also critical. This research examines what elements impede supervisors from offering employees performance feedback. North Carolina municipal and county officials serve as the bases of analysis, as the author tests perceptions of these officials regarding structural and personal barriers based on factors identified in previous studies. Several recommendations for overcoming and reducing these barriers are offered.
**Introduction**

Performance issues can prevent an organization from reaching its highest performing potential. Every organization may have at one time had concerns over low performing employees. In such instances, supervisors have had to choose whether or not to have a difficult conversation with the employee about his or her work. Supervisors must serve as the first, and often most powerful, influence to correct these performance issues. When employee issues arise, the first course of action should often be a performance conversation. Progressive discipline outlines oral warnings as the first step to address performance issues. This places the responsibility on managers and supervisors to tackle what can be a challenging and intimidating process for the employee and supervisor alike.

There is limited research on the topic of personnel performance issues and barriers to performance conversations at the local government level. This capstone will examine barriers to performance conversations in North Carolina counties and municipalities by testing factors found to be relevant in previous research performed at the federal level of government. The findings will inform human resource professionals and local government supervisors by providing recommendations for overcoming hindrances to having performance conversations with problem employees.

**Literature**

Although it is important to address performance problems, various factors can dissuade supervisors from confronting poor performing employees. Research suggests that supervisors avoid having performance conversations with poor performers because they want to avoid confrontation or do not want to create a negative work environment. Some believe that confronting problem employees can cause them to develop a negative reputation of being overly tough and unfriendly. Other supervisors fear employees will file complaints or formal grievances. Researchers have suggested that because of laws protecting government employees, many supervisors feel they cannot discuss performance issues with the employee. Some supervisors also consider the performance management process to be too time-consuming and complicated to be worthwhile.

Researchers suggest that some supervisors feel they have no upper management support or doubt their own skills in confronting performance related problems because they have no training to handle such issues. Because supervisors realize that negative feedback is unsettling to employees, some avoid having performance conversations. Researchers suggest that supervisors may fear political ramifications and others may choose to avoid the problem by transferring or even promoting the problem employee to another department outside of their control. Some supervisors have also mastered the practice of simply taking quick disciplinary action as a way of avoiding having a difficult performance conversation. A barrage of reasons can explain why supervisors avoid confronting employees about performance problems, but if we can understand some of these factors impact a supervisor’s decisions, practitioners can use the information to better understand how to mitigate these problems.

**Methodology**

To identify what barriers are perceived to discourage supervisors from having performance conversations, the author surveyed North Carolina municipal and county officials. The survey was distributed in December 2012 to participants of the Municipal and County Administration course at the University of North Carolina’s School of Government. The course is designed to teach participants about how specific city and county services are provided so they can appreciate how specific laws, programs, and functions contribute to the achievement of the overall mission of a local government. The group selected, although a convenience sample, was composed of city and county managers, assistant managers, department heads, line managers and other city or county officials across North Carolina. A majority of the participants had previous supervisory experience.

To understand the impact of various factors on the willingness of supervisors to address performance problems, survey participants were asked to indicate the extent to which performance problems are an issue for their organization and their perception of the challenge of having performance conversations. The survey examined a range of the challenges outlined in the literature to test the extent
they are factors for local government officials. The survey addressed the following: concerns of a negative reputation and work relationship, internal organizational repercussions, restrictive laws that limit how supervisors can address performance issues, complexity and time-consuming nature of the documentation process, limited skills and training in having performance conversations, and the use of other methods to avoid having the conversations.

Questionnaires were sent to 99 municipal and county officials, and were completed by 68 for a response rate of 68%. Survey participants were asked to rate the perception of potential barriers in their organization among supervisors generally and the severity of each barrier. Finally, they were presented a scenario about an employee who was typically a good worker but whose performance started to slip, and were asked to rank the top three reasons that would give them pause in deciding to have a performance conversation with the employee. The results were analyzed using frequencies, correlations, and cross-tabulations.

**Results and Discussion**

The set of respondents included a variety of local government professionals. It consisted of a roughly equal distribution of male and female respondents who served communities ranging from 959 to 944,000 in population. Respondents serve as managers, assistant managers, department heads, assistant department heads, directors, and line managers from various divisions.

To understand what barriers are perceived by supervisors to discourage them from having performance conversations, the author analyzed the survey data and determined the factors most commonly identified as affecting supervisors generally and respondents individually. Analysis of survey responses revealed how demographics affect supervisory perceptions.

**General Factors**

Survey respondents identified several factors that they think affect whether supervisors in their organization have performance conversations with problem employees. Among 59 respondents that answered questions about supervisors in their organization, 59% of them agreed or strongly agreed that confrontation avoidance is an important barrier. They also identified other factors that they agreed may act as barriers to supervisors having conversations with poor performers. Figure 1 presents the most common factors the respondents identified as giving supervisors pause.

![Figure 1. The Top Factors Respondents Identified As Barriers That Hinder Supervisors In Their Organizations From Having Performance Conversations](image-url)

*The chart below represents the percentage of respondents that agreed or strongly agreed each factor.*

- Dislike and Avoid Confrontation: 59%
- Have No Skills In Having Difficult Conversations: 49%
- Do Not Want to Be Perceived As Tough: 43%
- Are Not Trained to Deal With Performance Issues: 42%
- Do Not Want to Get Employees In Trouble: 41%
- Employees Actively Avoid Feedback: 39%
- Supervisors Fear Creating A Negative Work Environment: 32%
- Laws Place Unreasonable Restrictions: 32%
- Transfer Employees Out of the Division: 32%
**Individual Factors**

In addition to identifying the barriers that may discourage supervisors from confronting poor performers, respondents selected factors that would cause them to hesitate to confront a normally good employee whose performance started to decline. Respondents each selected the top three factors that may cause them to hesitate to confront a poor performing employee. Table 1 lists the top three factors and the percentage of the respondents identifying these factors among their top three hindrances:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. The Top Barriers Respondents Identified As One of Their Top 3 Reasons to Hesitate Having Performance Conversations (N=51)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I do not want to create a negative work environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation makes me uncomfortable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the documentation process for poor performers is too time-consuming to be worthwhile.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The percentages add to over 100% because respondents were able to select multiple options.*

The factors respondents identified for themselves and supervisors in their organizations are closely aligned, suggesting that the perception of others and the perception of self is linked.

**Correlations**

The survey asked each respondent to rate how difficult it is in their organization to address performance issues using a five point scale ranging from not at all difficult to very difficult. Respondents also answered questions about the presence of various barriers to performance conversations and rated the severity of each barrier using a five point scale. Six barriers were found to have a statistically significant relationship \( (p \leq .01) \) with the difficulty of addressing performance issues in these organizations, as follows:

1. Supervisors avoid confrontation \( (r=.509) \)
2. Supervisors lack training to deal with performance issues \( (r=.505) \)
3. Supervisors worry about creating a negative work environment \( (r=.495) \)
4. Supervisors transfer employees out of the division so they don’t have to deal with them \( (r=.482) \)
5. Supervisors believe the documentation process is too complicated to be worthwhile \( (r=.387) \)
6. Supervisors worry employees will file grievances and complaints \( (r=.364) \)

**Demographic Influences**

Although many perceptual factors affect whether supervisors choose to have a difficult conversation with employees, demographic factors appear to provide some explanation for the variation in responses. A number of demographic variables were explored within this research, including gender, jurisdiction population, position in the organization, number of employees in the division, time employed, supervisory experience, and the number of employees they supervised. These demographic characteristics were tested because many studies have explored how each of these characteristics affects the management styles of supervisors.

**Gender**

Among survey respondents, men were more likely to be concerned with being perceived as too tough. Sixty percent of men agreed or strongly agreed that supervisors in their organization do not want to be perceived as too tough, compared to only 31% of women, differing from past studies that suggest...
women are more likely to be concerned with toughness. Women, however, were more likely to indicate discomfort with confrontation—with 62.5% of women respondents identifying this factor as a top three reason they would hesitate to confront an employee, compared to 34.7% of men.

**Time Employed With Organization**

Among survey respondents, the longer a supervisor had been employed with a given organization, the more likely he or she was to perceive the performance conversation and documentation process that accompanies it as too time-consuming to be worthwhile. No employee that has been with the organization less than a year agreed or strongly agreed the documentation process is too time-consuming; however, once supervisors had been with the organization for over three years an average of 21% of supervisors found the process to be too time-consuming to be worthwhile.

**Supervisory Experience**

Among survey participants, respondents with more supervisory experience were less likely to be concerned about political ramifications. Forty percent of respondents with no supervisory experience listed political ramifications as one of the three top factors that would cause them to hesitate to confront an employee. As experience increased to 6-10 years of experience, the percentage of supervisors fearing political ramifications dwindled to 8.3% and fell to 5.2% for those having more than 10 years of experience.

The results also revealed that the more experience a supervisor has, the less likely that he or she will allow their concern of getting employees in trouble to hinder their decision to have a performance conversation. No supervisors with over ten years of experience agreed that they would hesitate because they worry about getting employees in trouble; 25% of supervisors, however, with 1-3 years of experience, and 60% of respondents with no experience said they would hesitate to have a conversation with poor performers because they worry about getting employees in trouble.

**Recommendations**

To overcome the problem of supervisors not having performance conversations with poor performers, local government officials should offer and encourage supervisors and employees to take training for having difficult conversations. Based on the results of the survey, these trainings should offer skills on conducting performance conversations in a manner that will maintain a positive work environment. If possible, instructors should try to understand the factors that directly affect each group of students for each course so trainings can be tailored to each group and offer solutions based only on the barriers that affect them. For instance, a class of newly appointed supervisors would benefit from reassurance that their anxieties about getting employees in trouble or facing political ramifications from honest feedback are misplaced, as more experienced supervisors believe it is unlikely. Trainees should also participate in role play activities so they can practice confronting problem employees and become comfortable in addressing performance problems.

Through these recommendations, North Carolina local government officials can begin to take steps to ensure supervisors in their organizations address performance problems when employee issues arise.
5 Liff, Managing Government Employees, p. 69.
6 Liff, Managing Government Employees, p. 69.
8 Moss and Sanchez,“Are Your Employees Avoiding You?”
10 Longenecker and Ludwig, “Ethical Dilemmas in Performance Appraisal Revisited”
11 Moss and Sanchez,“Are Your Employees Avoiding You?”
12 Refer to Appendix B for the percentages of each demographic.
13 Appendix C outlines the percentages of other factors surveyors listed as one of the top three factors that would hinder supervisors from having performance conversations.
14 For the purposes of analysis, the scale was reversed from its appearance in the questionnaire.
15 Survey participants offered the following as other reasons they may not address underperforming employees: tenure, accusations of being racist or sexist, lack of merit raises that discourage employees, lack of clarity with performance measures, lack of support from Human Resources, friendships with the employee, more important matters to address elsewhere, and no organizational defined process for handling these problems.
16 See Chusmir (1989) for additional information about past research on gender differences in conflict in the workplace.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Difficult Conversations in Organizations Survey

Do you confirm that you consented to participating in this survey?
Yes   No

Are individual performance issues a common problem within your organization? (Select One)
Yes   No
Skip Pattern Question: If yes, on a scale of 1-5, 5 being extremely high and 1 being extremely low, how large of a problem are performance issues in your organization?
1   2   3   4   5

Generally, how difficult is it in your organization to address individual performance issues? (Select One)
Very Difficult
Moderately Difficult
Neutral
A Little Difficult
Not At All Difficult

1. **Cultural, Organizational, and Personal Characteristics:** The following section asks you to reflect on the factors that impact the management culture and priorities in your organization and yourself. A supervisor is defined as anyone who oversees another person. Circle the rating that best describes your agreement or disagreement with the following statements.

**How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
a. Laws that protect government employees place unreasonable restrictions on how supervisors can address employee performance issues. | 1        | 2        | 3       | 4       | 5             |
b. Documenting poor employee performance is too complicated to be worthwhile. | 1        | 2        | 3       | 4       | 5             |
c. Documenting poor employee performance is too time-consuming to be worthwhile. | 1        | 2        | 3       | 4       | 5             |
d. Supervisors in my organization are trained to deal with employee performance issues. | 1        | 2        | 3       | 4       | 5             |
e. Supervisors in my organization have skills in having difficult conversations with poorly performing employees. | 1        | 2        | 3       | 4       | 5             |
f. Most supervisors in my organization avoid taking corrective employee action because they are concerned about getting employees in trouble.

g. Although supervisors in my organization try to have performance conversations, most employees actively avoid feedback.

h. Supervisors in my organization do not want to be perceived as tough supervisors.

i. Supervisors in my organization do not believe that addressing poorly performing employees creates a negative work environment.

j. Supervisors in my organization avoid confrontation.

k. Supervisors in my organization avoid addressing performance issues out of concern that employees will file complaints.

l. Supervisors’ actions to correct poor employee performance are consistently supported by higher-level management in my organization.

m. Supervisors in my organization believe they will suffer internal political consequences if they take action against a poorly performing employee.

n. Supervisors do not take quick disciplinary action as a way to avoid performance conversations.

o. A common strategy amongst supervisors is to transfer problem employees out of the division.

p. I avoid conflict if I can.

q. I avoid giving employees critical feedback so that I won’t be known as a tough supervisor.

r. I do not feel supported by higher-level management when correcting poor employee performance.

s. I feel confident when dealing with employee performance issues.

t. I hesitate to have conversations with problem employees because I do not want to get others in trouble.

Please list any other factors that affect how supervisors address performance issues:
2. **Descriptive Scenario:** The following section asks you to reflect on a specific scenario and how you will handle the situation. Please mark the answer that best reflects your personal response to addressing the problem.

Imagine you have a subordinate who has worked in the same capacity for the past two years. She has been a good employee in the past, but her performance has started to slip.

Would you confront the employee and address directly your performance concerns?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

**Skip Pattern Question:** If yes, assuming that this is an issue that does not have safety or political ramifications, when would you likely address the issue?

- That day
- Within 1 week
- Whenever convenient, but certainly within 1 month
- Whenever the subject comes up naturally
- At the employee’s next performance review

Even if you decide that you must confront the issue directly, it can be a difficult choice to do so. Please select the top 3 reasons you might have hesitated to confront the employee. (Please fill in your rank order in the spaces provided using numbers 1 through 3.)

- Confrontation makes me uncomfortable.
- I fear I will be perceived as a tough supervisor.
- I think the documentation process for poor performers is too time-consuming to be worthwhile.
- I think the documentation process for poor performers is too complicated to be worthwhile.
- I lack the training and skills for these situations.
- I do not want to create a negative work environment.
- I do not think the employee wants my feedback.
- I do not want to get the employee in trouble.
- I lack skills in having difficult conversations
- I fear I will suffer from internal political consequences if I address the issue.
- Other barriers that prevent you from confronting the employee: ________________________________.

3. **About Your Organization and Role**
   a. What is your gender?
      - Male
      - Female

   b. What is the population of your city or county? (Select One)
      - Under 10,000 citizens
      - 10,000-24,999 citizens
      - 25,000 citizens and over
c. What type of position do you hold in your organization? (Select One)
   Manager/Assistant Manager
   Department Head
   Line Manager
   Other:

d. How many employees are in your division? (Select one)
   1-5 employees
   6-10 employees
   11-15 employees
   16-20 employees
   21 or more employees

e. How long have you been with your organization? (Select one)
   Less than 1 year
   1-3 years
   More than 3 years but less than 6 years
   6-10 years
   More than 10 years

f. How many years of supervisory experience do you have? (Select one)
   None
   Less than 1 year
   1-3 years
   More than 3 years but less than 6 years
   6-10 years
   More than 10 years

g. How many employees do you supervise?
   None
   1-5 employees
   6-10 employees
   11-16 employees
   17 or more employees
**Survey Respondent Demographics**

What is your gender?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is the population of your city or county? (Select One)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 10,000 citizens</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000-24,999 citizens</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25,000 citizens and over</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What type of position do you hold in your organization?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager/Assistant Manager</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Line Manager</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
How many employees are in your division? (Select one)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1-5 employees     | 16       | 28%
| 6-10 employees    | 11       | 19%
| 11-15 employees   | 4        | 7%
| 16-20 employees   | 4        | 7%
| 21 or more employees | 23   | 40%
| Total             | 58       | 100%

How long have you been with your organization? (Select one)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Less than 1 year                                 | 4        | 7%
| 1-3 years                                        | 8        | 14%
| More than 3 years but less than 6 years          | 16       | 27%
| 6-10 years                                      | 13       | 22%
| More than 10 years                              | 18       | 31%
| Total                                           | 59       | 100%
How many years of supervisory experience do you have? (Select one)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 3 years but less than 6 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</table>

How many employees do you supervise?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5 employees</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 employees</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-16 employees</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 or more employees</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix C

**Barriers Respondents Identified As One of Their Top 3 Reasons to Hesitate Having Performance Conversations**

(N=51)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I do not want to create a negative work environment.</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation makes me uncomfortable.</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the documentation process for poor performers is too time-consuming to be worthwhile.</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I fear I will suffer internal political consequences if they address the issue.</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I lack the training and skills for those situations.</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not want to get the employee in trouble.</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe the documentation process is too complicated to be worthwhile.</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not think the employee wants their feedback.</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>