



# Responding to Behaviors that Undermine Learning

All supervisors eventually face the challenge of responding to unmet expectations, broken promises, or inappropriate behavior in the workplace. The frequency and severity of issues that undermine a community's ability to help students are variables that depend on the size of the school, its history, and its culture. However, the stress and distraction that result from attempting to ignore such issues are constants.

In this chapter, we offer examples of oral and written communication to help supervisors respond clearly, efficiently, and respectfully to unprofessional behavior. Because we are focused on tapping the power of pooled intelligence and shared accountability, our examples are about its absence: violation of policies or norms that affect a group's work, poor collaboration, and the failure to implement collegial agreements about improvements. However, the approaches and models described could be used for any identified gap between the performance needed to help students learn or be safe and a staff member's present performance.

Ultimately, supervisors seek a willing, thoughtful, and permanent shift in behavior from inappropriate or ineffective to appropriate, effective, and productive. Approaches to a performance problem can legitimately include initiating the steps of progressive discipline, using the procedures of the normal evaluation cycle, or employing some combination of the two that simultaneously meets contractual obligations and individual development needs.

Typically supervisors begin with progressive discipline in the face of clear failures to follow well-articulated policies or expectations of the district: attendance requirements, reporting requirements, or personal use of district materials or facilities ("conduct unbecoming a teacher"). When concerns are qualitative and therefore subject to multiple interpretations, supervisors are more likely to start with activities that are part of the district's evaluation cycle such as observations, conferences, coaching, or data analysis. Keep in mind that starting with evaluation procedures does not preclude the use of progressive discipline if the situation later justifies it. Nor does beginning

with progressive discipline take away a supervisor's right and opportunity to help an individual change through successive rounds of observation and feedback.

## Introduction to Zones of Response

If responses to a performance concern can legitimately vary, then what guides a supervisor's choice of method and tools? Skillful leaders assess the severity of the problem and look for evidence of prior clear communication about the expectations for appropriate behavior. They make sure they know contractual and legal requirements related to the problem and get advice from counsel. Finally, they appraise the staff member's demonstrated ability to understand the problem and take independent action to resolve it. We label this initial decision-making process *matching* because leaders sort through their options for the one that best matches the performance problem and the employee.<sup>1</sup> To clarify the different matching options for supervisors, we began to think of two general types of response, each with its own characteristics. To make the image graphic, we associated the two response types with the colors used in managing traffic: green for less severe problems and red for problems that require an immediate cessation of the offending behavior and a higher level of intervention.

In the green zone are a range of responses to problems mutually recognized and acknowledged by supervisor and staff member and for matters that do not involve a mandated written communication. They are not for issues of student safety, potential misconduct, insubordination, or the like. The zone is dubbed *green* because the characteristic exchanges are collegial and collaborative. The function of the exchange is to close a performance gap quickly and efficiently, and the intended message is “*keep going*, but fine-tune or extend your practice.” The supervisor names the problem and cites the data that illustrate it. The parties acknowledge that the teacher has the necessary expertise to work on the problem, is expected to be the primary decision maker about the best ways to resolve it, and will be accountable for improvements without further pointed directives and monitoring. The supervisor assumes no formal responsibility for follow-up. Any further exchanges about the issue are generally collaborative and inquiry based rather than directive. We hope that most conversations about instruction, professional development plans, and even interactions around minor breaches of policy or procedure would fit in this zone, but we have worked in schools long enough to know that such exchanges are not the appropriate response to every problem a supervisor encounters.

<sup>1</sup>The term is borrowed with thanks from Jon Saphier who originally used it to label the process that a teacher uses in selecting strategies from a repertoire by taking account of student needs, curriculum goals, time of day and year, etc.

Some performance issues require a supervisor to do more than engage in a supportive, problem-solving conversation. Therefore leaders need a range of red-zone responses that say in essence “*Stop* doing X and start doing Y.” The compliance, targeted development, or assignment to formal assistance responses are all characterized by variations of that stop-start message. The supervisor signals the severity of the concern, uses his or her authority to make judgments about performance, collaborates on a plan to resolve the performance gap, and takes responsibility for monitoring and follow-up. Each type of intervention we will consider has a particular function and a distinguishing tool or mode of communication and documentation. Compliance responses are appropriate when:

- Careful, respectful green-zone exchanges have not worked.
- Behavior indicates that an individual cannot be trusted to follow policy guidelines or keep school-wide agreements.
- Violations of contracts, policies, or regulations require that an individual be officially notified and disciplined.

Compliance responses are characterized by a straightforward and, if necessary, escalating, demand that the person meet what are usually clear, agreed-upon, concrete conditions of employment. The key tool is the summary memo.

Targeted development is a red-zone response designed to make sure inefficient or inappropriate performance stops and that the individual acquires the necessary competencies to perform effectively. Development-oriented responses are appropriate when evaluation has identified specific, well-defined performance problems that cannot be rectified by compliance alone. These problems more commonly involve deficiencies in instruction than policy transgressions. Perhaps a teacher’s work does not meet standard in a particular area or an individual has resisted implementing a specific program or set of strategies. Targeted Development offers a short-term, middle-ground intervention between unmonitored recommendations attached to the end of an evaluation and a full assistance plan consistent with district contract agreements. The supervisor assumes that the individual does not yet have the knowledge or skills to make the change without help and commits to providing that help and assessing its effects. The goal is to engage the individual in his or her own improvement in order to achieve rapid and sustained change. The key tool for this kind of response is the MiniPlan<sup>SM</sup>—or what some states and districts might call the pre-Assistance or Awareness plan.

In contrast, responses that fall into the Assignment to Formal Assistance category are usually dictated by evaluation agreement or contract. They are good matches when an individual’s performance is below standard in several areas and when earlier, less stringent and less formal efforts have failed. A planning tool is often specified, and the supervisor may have to employ a team of people with the specific expertise to help the staff member change. Table 12.1 provides an overview of the different responses that we will examine in greater detail.

**TABLE 12.1 Overview of Zones of Response**

	<b>Function/Audience</b>	<b>Characteristics of Interaction</b>	<b>Key Tools</b>
<b>GREEN ZONE (collaborative interaction)</b>	To promote awareness, reflection, self-assessment leading to self-directed change. Teachers who are engaged learners.	Communication based on data and questions, non-judgmental suggestions. Teacher decides when/if to implement and follow-up. Low accountability.	Data Collegial conferences Summaries of next steps
<b>RED ZONE Compliance</b>	To mandate technical compliance with policies or procedures. Staff who need to be disciplined to adhere to expectations	Administrator driven. No staff choice. Escalated sequence of intervention. Recommendations designed with clear accountability measures. May involve steps of progressive discipline	Data Meetings to clarify expectations Summary memos
<b>Targeted Development</b>	To engage teachers in taking responsibility for and fixing a specific aspect of performance that is currently substandard. Mediocre performers who are willing to engage in their own improvement beyond compliance.	Administrator identifies standard not met and the data that have led to that rating. Teacher and administrator develop goals, select action steps, decide on data to collect, and identify indicators for success. Administrator determines whether standard has been met and next steps.	Data MiniPlan <sup>SM</sup>
<b>Assignment to Formal Assistance</b>	To remediate performance using district-negotiated policies. Teachers with serious, unresolved problems.	Administrator driven with involvement of appropriate support systems and personnel. Teacher may have some role in helping to design the plan. High accountability. Failure to show progress may result in dismissal.	Data Contractually designated forms and procedures Written feedback