

Navigating a Workplace Demotion: A Transition For All



Tips for helping a demoted supervisor return to the workplace

A supervisor or manager may be demoted for poor performance, misconduct, economic issues or organizational restructuring. Navigating a change in roles is difficult, but a successful transition is possible if well managed. Although Canadian courts frown on the practice of demotion, the transition can be made under the right conditions.

3 Components of a Successful Transition Back Into The Workplace

When an employee is demoted from a supervisory or manager role, the entire team feels the impact. Mixed emotions and loyalties will be in play. The reasons for the demotion may be different, but the range of emotions will be strikingly similar; resentment, anger, compassion, confusion, negativity, and fear. Once the demotion is set in motion, managing the transition will require focusing on moving forward and not looking back.

What impacts the ability of an employee to transition into a demoted role?
Three key components of this transition are:

1. ***How the situation is managed and communicated by management*** –Management must be positive and clearly supportive of the change, maintain open lines of communication with the demoted employee and provide the employee with clear expectations around performance and job details.
2. ***How the other members of the organization are prepared and managed*** – Co-workers may be unclear how to navigate a changed relationship. Provide them with information on how the employee's role will be different but remind them that the person is not. Management will need to communicate the employee's strengths, expertise, and ability to contribute in specific ways.

3. *How well the individual being demoted manages the emotions and relationships connected to the situation.* The biggest challenges for a demoted employee include managing the new role and former relationships while keeping emotions in check. If the employee was demoted for reasons of performance and misconduct, you may still need to put workplace expectations in place and communicate these expectations, but return to work should focus on what the employee has to contribute. Whatever the reasons for the demotion, the employee has been retained and the goal is for the employee to return to work and make a valuable contribution.

Even When Misconduct Was Involved?

This change is easier to navigate when the employee was demoted as a result of an organizational change that has nothing to do with his/her performance, but it is also possible to move forward in situations where the demotion was a result of poor behaviour and misconduct. One of the key considerations is that the employee who engaged in the poor behaviour or misconduct will need to be prepared to take ownership and, if relevant, apologize for the misconduct to those directly impacted. If the person being demoted does not accept ownership for the misconduct, it will be very difficult to integrate the employee back into the same team or even in the organization, and a demotion and return to the team may be unwise.

Integrating A Demoted Employee Back Into The Workplace

To help your employee manage this transition you need a plan for each of the following phases of the process.

Stage 1: The New Supervisor/Manager:

In an ideal situation, a demoted supervisor should be given an opportunity to join a new team or be given the choice to join a new team. Moving into an existing team with an established supervisor/manager has challenges but also advantages, as the role of the supervisor is already in place.

If you have to return the demoted employee to the original team, you should return the demoted employee after a new supervisory structure is solidified. This could include hiring an outside person as a new supervisor, promoting from within, or assigning the duties to another manager from the organization. Introduce the new supervisor and allow this new supervisor at least a few days, but ideally a couple of weeks, to establish him/herself in the new role.

In either situation, before the employee returns to work, take steps to build the relationship with the supervisor and demoted employee by scheduling a couple of meetings. These can include telephone/Skype and an in-person meeting. Keep the meetings casual. The relationship between the new supervisor and demoted employee will be an important part of the transition.

Stage 2: Three Stage Communications

Your initial communication about the employees' return and new role is important. If management does not communicate confidence in the process and the demoted employee the team will lose cohesion.

Communicating the Change: If possible, introduce the new supervisor at the same

time that you announce the former supervisor will be returning in a different role. This may not always be possible, but it allows existing employees to have some resolution and see a path forward. When announcing the demotion, avoid using the word 'demoted.' Consider words such as 'change' and 'new' attached to 'role', 'duties', 'position'. This communicates a new start and rather than an end.

Communicating the Return to the Team: In anticipation of the employee's return, prepare a brief message that can be communicated in-person to the direct team. If possible, the new supervisor/manager should be the one to communicate this. In a meeting, focus on the future and do not dwell on the details of the past. Consider saying the following:

John has been asked to fill a new role in the team. I am pleased that we are able to continue to benefit from his . . . (skills, experience or knowledge). People and organizations experience change and we are no different. John's new role will allow him to focus his time on _____ (highlight the key aspects of his new role).

Communicating to the Entire Organization: Should you message the entire organization? The answer is 'No, not necessarily.' There is no need to publicly announce the dressing down of the former supervisor. When the demoted employee returns, include the employee's name, new job title and department in a communication as you would any new employee or employee change.

2. Return to Work

When the demoted supervisor returns to work, the new supervisor/manager should publicly welcome the employee back to work with a smile and a handshake to communicate support. This can be as simple as a greeting outside the manager's office or in a natural location when the demoted employee arrives into work that first day. Consider having the manager say something like

'Welcome back, John. It is good that you are joining us today – there is a project that needs your particular skills and attention.'

And with that, get the demoted employee back to work quickly. The team will often follow the lead of the leader in accepting the situation.

Avoid having the demoted employee come into work early, meet with the new manager before the shift begins, and emerge from the managers office as co-workers arrive. This can have the effect of communicating to everyone that this employee needs to start the shift with a reprimand. The faster everyone moves to a normal routine, the better.

3. Ongoing Support

Even with a good and well-managed return to work plan, a demoted employee may struggle with adjusting to the new role. Over the first two to three weeks, it will be the small acts of positive reinforcement and support that can make all the difference. Encourage the demoted employee by indicating the opportunity to receive a promotion is possible in the future.

Identify the employee's strengths and focus on applying and using the strengths during the first couple of weeks of transition. When possible and appropriate,

provide positive, casual, and public acknowledgement of the demoted employee's contributions. The better able your organization is to help the demoted employee relax, believe he/she is valued and get back to work, the more the entire team will benefit.

Regardless of your reasons for demoting the employee, treating people with respect and consideration is the path forward. If you want the demoted employee to succeed, then expect he/she can and help set the tone so others will share this expectation.