

# Digging Roots and Finding Gold

Article by Jack Riley



Derrick is a long-term employee who works in your shipping department and is responsible for ensuring back-order shipments are filled the day parts arrive from the warehouse. He is also responsible for prioritizing all repair order parts while receiving stock. Derrick is known to be the master of the systems used for ordering, expediting, and shipping.

Lately, though, you've heard complaints accusing Derrick of holding up parts flow and that he doesn't seem to care about his tasks or performance. You have also heard a few complaints from customers. There is obviously a problem, but you see his behaviour as uncharacteristic. You want to make sure customers are looked after and you want to ensure other departments can maintain their performance levels and commitments, so you know you need to address the issue with Derrick. On the other hand, you don't want to risk upsetting Derrick or losing him as an employee!

As a leader, you will likely encounter similar situations many times in your career, and each occurrence holds a level of risk. So, what should you do?

There are many questions that need asking, but a good start is to gather up information and examples specific to the issues before moving forward. It is definitely best not to commit to any action without being fully prepared. What you find may be quite surprising, and what you do with it could make or break some of the foundations of your dealership.

Let's look at the steps you should take to give Derrick a chance before making any ultimate decisions. It is easier than you might think, and definitely worthwhile:

- 1. Be straightforward and don't sugar-coat.** Derrick probably already knows things aren't going well so it is best to be direct and address your concerns openly and honestly. Be specific and don't generalize.
- 2. Find out why.** Ask questions and don't assume. Make a concerted effort to listen and engage with Derrick while identifying the root of the problem(s). This will build trust into the conversation.
- 3. Be open and understanding.** Derrick has been a fixture at your dealership for a while and you need to let him know he is valued. He also likely already knows about disciplinary steps but he may not

know whether you want to help him or whether you are just building a case against him. Therefore, it is best to make your intentions clear up front. You may even want to tell him about a time when you had to correct your own actions and how that worked out.

**4. Gain commitment for specific improvements.** You should both agree with the expected outcomes, and both should leave the meeting with a clear idea of what happens next. For example, Derrick will delegate tasks and ask for help when needed... or...you will provide training or resources to support improvement efforts.

**5. Recap your conversation in writing.** This step should never be overlooked as it is crucial to setting commitments in motion. Your written recap should include all key takeaways and next steps. It should also clearly describe the consequences you discussed if improvements don't occur.

**6. Continued follow up.** It is important that follow-up meetings be scheduled to check in on progress. Re-evaluation at predetermined intervals helps you and Derrick by ensuring quality discussion around performance as well as any obstacles encountered. If anything arises between scheduled meetings, you should not wait until the next meeting to discuss it with him. Feedback occurring on an ongoing basis is helpful to you and Derrick both for making small corrections on the fly.

The example used above was an actual occurrence and it turned out that this discovery dug up a lot of gold while getting to the root of the matter. This long-term, ever-reliable employee (until lately) was not really the root of the problem after all. For various reasons the shipping department had recently gone through significant staff turnover. Derrick felt responsible for picking up the slack because he made a commitment and didn't want to let anyone down. He really wasn't equipped to be dealing with the development of new employees as much as they needed. By the time the problems came to light, Derrick was already well behind in most of his own duties. He thought he was failing, he was too embarrassed to ask for help, and was planning on quitting his job.

Discussions with Derrick clearly showed that immediately visible problems are not necessarily the real problem. Also, lessons emerged like the need for adequate training and resources, the value of planning, and that it would have been beneficial to communicate the current stresses of the department to the rest of the organization. These are only a few.

Whatever is occurring in your dealership that appears problematic is worth digging in deeper to fully understand what is really going on. Taking the steps laid out above in an effort to improve performance, can not only set you and your employees on track for quick success, it will also send a good message throughout your dealership that you, as a leader, are committed to your employees through good times and bad.

For more information on best practices for commercial dealerships, contact the author of this article, Jack Riley. Jack is VP of Consulting Services at DFS Solutions and can be reached at [jriley@dfs-solutions.com](mailto:jriley@dfs-solutions.com).

