Several years ago, my two-day middle management class on performance management passed by, hum-de-dum, as these things do. It was a good class, but I don’t remember much about it now other than this one statement from the trainer: “Performance problems are like mushrooms. They grow in the dark.” I remember the pregnant pause as this statement was made, and then the slow nods, and the realization that the statement was true.

Later, as a manager in the “real” world, I realized just how true this statement is. Performance problems are like mushrooms, and they do grow in the dark. Remember – mushrooms are not a plant; they are the body of fungi, and they grow fast! When nobody bothers to check on them and just leaves them to do what fungi do, before you know it you’ll have a whole slew of them.

This brings us to the question of why so many managers fail to illuminate employee performance problems, or “mushrooms.” I believe it is mostly down to two reasons: First, fear, and second, a lack of know-how.

Let’s talk first about fear. Shining a light on people’s performance problems is not a favorite task of most managers or leaders, despite what their staff may think. I have only had to do it once, and I wished at that point that I’d never have to again (and luckily I haven’t had to!) Managers are often afraid of tackling performance problems because they don’t want to upset someone, or they don’t want to deal with conflict, or they are just afraid that they’ll “get it wrong.” But, left alone in the dark, the problem will only get worse, just like the proverbial fungi. Smart managers will address the issue early on, get commitment from the employee for change, and move forward in a positive way.

The other reason managers don’t tackle problems is a lack of know-how. This is easily solved by making sure that they know what performance problems are, how to spot them, how to attack them, and when to attack them – best achieved through training and practice. Managers also need encouragement and support to act before the issue becomes too big – or in other words, before the mushrooms grow too much! In short, managers must manage!

Should you need further convincing, remember that problems caught early can be addressed before the person gets into bad habits, or worse, affects others by their bad habits. Still not convinced? Try remembering that sometimes our biggest weaknesses can become our biggest strengths - think of reformed smokers who are the biggest advocates for not smoking, for example. The long term benefit of “illuminating mushrooms” is that your staff trusts you because they know what you are thinking and that you are being straight with them. So, managers: Be brave! Go shine your light and tackle those mushrooms before they grow too big!