

The “Muscle Level” Model for Performance Management:¹

Adapted by David Dyck (dd@workplaceconflict.ca) from author, Brad McRae

The *Muscle Level* framework is intended to assist you in assessing how much force or power to apply to a given situation. Author Brad McRae suggests that there are two common missteps with the application of power: *too much too soon and too little too late*. He suggests thinking ahead of time about (and even writing down) how much force you are going to use in a given interaction so that you are prepared appropriately and can avoid under-reacting or overreacting.

Examples of what you could say at each level follow below:

1. **Muscle Level 1 is a polite, more low-key reminder:**

–“Just a quick reminder that t’s important to close the loop with the contractor in a timely way. By timely, I’m looking for within one work week of the first call. Make sense? Thank you...” OR
–“I’ve noticed you’ve been coming in about 5 or 10 minutes late. Just a reminder that we actually need you here, ready to start, right at 8:30 a.m.. Okay? Thanks...”

2. **Muscle Level 2 is another request, but with stronger word choice, tone, and body language:**

–“When three weeks go by and you still have not made contact with the contractor, I become concerned. I really need you to find a way to get these files closed more quickly. What’s getting in the way?” and “Is there something I can do to help?” OR
–“I’m noticing that you’re still arriving late for the start of your shift. When that happens someone else needs to cover for you and that means that person can’t do their own job. I really need you to find a way to be here on time. Is there something we can do to help?”

3. **Muscle Level 3 involves your stating of future consequences if performance is not improved in concrete terms within a set time frame:**

–“So, I meeting with you today because I have noticed that you are still having trouble getting most of your files closed within the time frame we previously discussed.” OR “...that you are still arriving late.” (ALLOW RESPONSE/LISTEN) “We will need to revisit this in two weeks. If this is still a problem at that time, I will take the step of making a formal note on your file, which is the first part of the disciplinary process. I’d really rather not have to take this step. So, what are your thoughts on how can we address this problem? I still want to help you to succeed.”

4. **Muscle Level 4 entails the application of the consequences stated in level 3.**

–“So, two weeks have passed and, in our discussion today, we have agreed that 8 of your 10 current files are still open beyond the allotted time frame. Given that reality, I am following through and have placed a letter of your file documenting my concern with this area of your performance.” OR
–“So, Tom, you were late 7 out of the last 10 work days. I’ve now made a formal note for your yearly performance review. I need to tell you at this point that if this does not improve during this next quarter we’ll have no choice but to reconsider whether you can continue in your position. It’s that important.”

¹ Adapted from *Negotiating and Influencing Skills: The Art of Creating & Claiming Value*, by Brad McRae, Sage Publications, 1998.