

How to manage poor performance

Build a truly high performing team

Tackle the real employee problems with confidence

Don't turn a blind eye to sub-standard work

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HOW TO MANAGE POOR PERFORMANCE

Introduction

Managing poor performance in the team is a scenario any manager will have to face sooner or later. Not everyone will be able to do the job they're in – maybe their life outside work changes, or they were a recruitment mistake, or the demands of the job become too much for their abilities. Or they simply need more knowledge or information or understanding.

As the manager you need to tackle it promptly - if you turn a blind eye and hope the person will go away, things will only get a whole lot worse.

This guide is a basic toolkit to enable you to act with confidence, within a best practice framework, and to resolve this sort of issue promptly.

Timing

As the manager you'll be continuously checking that the key work is being done effectively. You will be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of everyone reporting to you, through regular contact. In some roles you might have specific data on individual performance, such as work rate or sales, so that you can quickly identify potential problems.

If you notice an actual or potential problem in the way an individual is carrying out their work, you're in a position to deal with it promptly - don't wait until the next performance review. Deal with any emerging problems as soon as they become apparent.

It's best not to put off doing anything until a major incident or disaster occurs – but if a major hiccup does happen, look at whether anyone's poor performance contributed and how, and take action to ensure it doesn't happen again.

If others are flagging up someone's under-performance to you, subtly check it out, even if you don't at first agree. And don't wait until everyone else in the workplace is totally fed up because of the underperformance!

Identify what isn't working

Identify the precise areas of under-performance. Exactly what element of the job is the employee not performing well enough? What sort of things are happening?

Poor performance can be a lack of productivity, efficiency, effectiveness, or an underdeveloped skill set for example.

Gather clear examples and facts which demonstrate the level of performance. Do not rely on hearsay, or act because your boss told you to do it, or something as nebulous as niggling doubts.

Be clear about what matters for the job and why. For example if you have an accountant or lawyer who's fantastic with interpreting the numbers or legislation but who also needs to advise clients and interact with them persuasively, maybe they can change given the right feedback and coaching - but maybe they can't.

Why the under-performance

At this stage, keep an open mind about the reasons for under-performance. You do not know what is going on in the employee's life. Don't assume they aren't capable and they just can't hack it.

Talking to the employee informally

Arrange one-to-one time with the under-performing employee somewhere you won't be interrupted or overheard.

Raise the issue as soon as possible, giving specific examples. Explain specifically where the person's performance doesn't meet the standard needed for the job. Clarify what changes are required.

Listen to what they have to say. Let them know you are concerned, not accusing. Ask about external factors, their own views about their performance, and what they think the expectations of them are. Ask them about training and skill sets.

Agree with the employee on action to remedy the situation. Develop a clear and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, reasonable) action plan designed to secure improvements in their skills and performance. Achieving the action plan must be enough to prove to you that the employee is able to bridge the performance gap, and is able to sustain it without constant supervision.

Be clear about the timescale you require the performance to improve within and how long you'll continue monitoring. A reasonable timescale would be 2 or 3 months depending on the level of job.

Be kind. The majority of people want to do well at work and it can be a nightmare experience for them if for some reason their performance isn't up to scratch. Genuinely wish them well and hope that they succeed.

Ensure the action plan or objectives are written down. Give the employee a copy.

If there are underlying problems

Sometimes the informal conversation will flag up to you that the employee has wider problems than not being able to do their job properly, and you will need to adapt the course of action to take them into account. For example:

- **Mismatch in recruitment.** If the person's performance is below the required standard after the job training is complete, it's likely there was a mismatch during the recruitment process. The new employee may feel the job isn't as it was described at interview.
- **Response to change.** Performance may dip as an individual struggles to adjust to changes in the job's content or skills needed. Consider:
 - Does the person need further training or guidance? Some people just take longer to learn new things than others but they're fine given a bit more time.
 - Is it practical to change some of the responsibilities or even move the person to another job where there's a better fit to their skills and ability?

Personal or domestic circumstances. The individual's motivation and focus may have deteriorated because of detachment triggered by domestic difficulties, and you will need to consider how far to cut people some slack. As the line manager you have a careful balance to strike between:

- demonstrating concern and fairness
- avoiding intrusion or over-involvement in the employee's life outside work
- expecting the person to carry out the job they're paid to do.

Before deciding on any action, try to identify whether the problem may be very specific and likely to be resolved within a short period of time, or is likely to continue indefinitely. The employee's length of service and the contribution they've made earlier are also relevant in considering how much slack to cut.

Making a small concession at the right time might be all that's required for the individual to sort out their own problem and return to doing a perfectly good job. Some examples:

- Temporarily reorganising workloads within the team during the most stressful period.
 - A more flexible work pattern or reduced working hours for a limited period. Whatever is agreed with the employee needs to be confirmed in writing as it represents a change to the employment contract.
 - Granting paid or unpaid leave if there is a crisis situation.
- **Ill health.** Even if someone isn't off sick, one reason they might be struggling to perform the job they're employed to do is ill health. Take occupational health advice and if a limiting health condition has developed, consider whether you can make reasonable adjustments to enable the person to carry on with their job.

Training and coaching

The informal conversation will probably identify a need for further job training. You may be able to provide this yourself, using coaching skills, or identify others in the team who can provide some input. There might be online learning materials or practical assignments that would help improve skills.

In the action plan identify who will be responsible for making the training happen: wherever possible it should be the employee in question.

There's an obligation on all employers to give their employees reasonable support, guidance and training in performing their job. The more structured and documented this is, the better, just in case things go wrong and you have to prove it happened.

Follow up

Give the employee in question every support in terms of guidance, training, mentoring, materials and guidance they might need.

Careful follow up of the action agreed at the informal counselling stage is critical. Meet the employee regularly after the initial discussion and give honest accurate feedback about their progress. Listen to them and amend the action plan if there are credible reasons for the lack of progress, but stick to your agreed timescale unless there are exceptional circumstances.

You know how you want your team to work. Don't settle for anything less, and expect great not mediocre results for your team.

The next stage

In most cases informal counselling and a coaching programme are enough to bring about the necessary improvement, early action saving greater problems later.

However if the performance doesn't improve within the timescales you've set, you will need to progress to something more formal using your company's disciplinary procedure.

Ultimately, if each stage in the procedure is followed correctly and the employee fails to improve to the required standard in the timescale you've set, this means you can fairly dismiss. An advantage in the short term is that the employee realises it's serious, focuses more and tries harder to improve.

Using the disciplinary process to improve performance

Disciplinary procedures vary a little between organisations but in principle they all follow the ACAS guidelines available at:

<http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/f/m/Acas-Code-of-Practice-1-on-disciplinary-and-grievance-procedures.pdf>.

As you did at the informal stage, before each disciplinary meeting you will identify the specifics where performance isn't good enough, and at the meeting you will listen to what the employee has to say. As the outcome, you will agree an action plan with SMART objectives. You will then monitor.

Where it's different, the formality of the disciplinary process means that:

- The employee has to be given written notice of the meeting, and must receive enough information about the performance issues and the possible consequences beforehand to prepare to answer the case at the disciplinary meeting.
- The employee is entitled to be accompanied at the meeting.
- The manager running the meeting should take reflection time after hearing what the employee has to say, before calling the person back in to tell them face-to-face about any penalty.
- The sequence, if there is no improvement, is written warning, final warning, dismissal. However if performance is seriously bad, it's not necessary to go through each stage in order, you can start at final written warning.
- At each stage the employee has the right to appeal, normally to your immediate manager. If you're the business owner, consult with The Human Resource about the most appropriate person to hear an appeal in the circumstances.

The outcome of a first disciplinary meeting for poor performance would normally be a written warning that will remain current for 6 months. However if the employee's work is so poor that it might have a serious or harmful impact on the company, it would be appropriate to move directly to a final written warning.

Keep a close eye on performance and if it still doesn't improve within the set timescales after the first formal warning, proceed to the next stage by arranging a second disciplinary meeting.

After the second disciplinary meeting, if there's still no improvement, you may then decide to issue a final written warning. This must warn the employee that if performance doesn't improve during the next monitoring period, you may have to consider their dismissal.

Dismissal

If all else fails, you will need to dismiss.

Be careful to follow the procedure by arranging a disciplinary meeting properly, and make the decision once you've reviewed the employee's performance against the action plan and heard what the person has to say.

Effect of poor performance on the team

If you fail to address poor performance, your team will probably become less than enchanted with you as their manager, even when the impact isn't extreme.

If you're working hard and the person next to you isn't and it just seems to be accepted, it's demotivating. One of the most frustrating experiences for a team is when they feel they're carrying someone who isn't pulling their weight, and frustration can turn to stress when the manager simply does nothing about it.

It's important to keep whatever you're doing confidential. Your team might not know **when** poor performance is being tackled. But they certainly do know if it is not being addressed at all.

If you manage poor performance well and manage to raise performance, then this not only instils a sense of achievement for the employee in question, it also gives a great message out to other staff that you are fair and tuned in to what is happening.

You don't have to put up with poor performance.

But tackling it can be tricky and sometimes stressful. The Human Resource takes the headaches away and supports you in managing individual cases helping you to be prepared, in control and confident that you're doing the right thing.

Email The Human Resource on enquiries@thehr.co.uk or call on 07884 475303 to arrange a no-obligation chat.

More information about the help we provide to business owners with employment is on our website www.thehr.co.uk.

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