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by Amy Gallo

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As a manager, you can't accept underperformance. It's frustrating, time-consuming, and it can demoralize the other people on your team. But what do you do about an employee who isn't performing up to snuff? How do you help turn around the problematic behavior? And how long do you let it go on before you cut your losses?

What the Experts Say

Your company may have a prescribed way of handling an underperformer, but most of those recommended processes aren't that useful, says Jean-François Manzoni, a professor of management at INSEAD and coauthor of *The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome: How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail*. "When you talk to senior executives, they'll usually acknowledge that those don't work," he says. So chances are, it's up to you as the manager to figure out what to do. "When people encounter an issue with underperformance, they really are on their own," says Joseph Weintraub, a professor of management and organizational behavior at Babson College and coauthor of the book, *The Coaching Manager: Developing Top Talent in Business*. Here's how to stage a productive intervention.

Don't ignore the problem

Too often these issues go unaddressed. "Most performance problems aren't dealt with directly," says Weintraub. "More often, instead of taking action, the manager will transfer the person somewhere else or let him stay put without doing anything." This is the wrong approach. Never allow underperformance to fester on your team. It's rare that these situations resolve themselves. It'll just get worse. You'll become more and more irritated and that's going to show and make the person uncomfortable," says Manzoni. If you have an issue, take steps toward solving it as soon as possible.

Consider what's causing the problem

Is the person a poor fit for the job? Does she lack the necessary skills? Or is she just misunderstanding

expectations? There is very often a mismatch between what managers and employees think is important when it comes to performance, Weintraub explains. It's critical to consider the role you might be playing in the problem. "You may have contributed to the negative situation," says Manzoni. "After all, it's rare that it's all the subordinate's fault just as it's rare that it's all the boss's." Don't focus exclusively on what the underperformer needs to do to remedy the situation — think about what changes you can make as well.

Ask others what you might be missing

Before you act, make sure to look at the problem objectively. You might talk to the person's previous boss or someone who's worked with him, or conduct a 360 review. When approaching other people, though, do it carefully and confidentially. Manzoni suggests you might say something like: "I'm worried that my frustration may be clouding my judgment. All I can see are the mistakes he's making. I want to make an honest effort to see what I'm missing." Look for evidence that might prove your assumptions wrong.

Talk to the underperformer

Once you've checked in with others, talk to the employee directly. Explain exactly what you're observing, how the team's work is affected, and make clear that you want to help. Manzoni suggests the conversation go something like this: "I'm seeing issues with your performance. I believe that you can do better and I know that I may be contributing to the problem. So how do we get out of this? How do we improve?" It's important to engage the person in brainstorming solutions. "Ask them to come up with ideas," says Weintraub. Don't expect an immediate response though. The person may need time to digest your feedback and come back later with some proposals.

Confirm whether the person is coachable

You can't coach someone who doesn't agree that they need help. In the initial conversation — and throughout the intervention — it's critical that the employee acknowledge the problem. "If someone says, 'I am who I am' or implies that they're not going to change, then you've got to make a decision whether you can live with the issue and at what cost," says Weintraub. On the other hand, if you see a willingness to change and a genuine interest in improving, chances are you can work together to turn things around.

Make a plan

Create a concrete plan for what both you and the employee are going to do differently, agreeing on measurable actions so you can mark progress. You should also ask what resources the employee needs to accomplish those goals. You don't want her to make promises she can't meet. Then, give her time. "Everyone needs time to change and maybe learn or acquire new skills," says Weintraub.

Regularly monitor their progress

It may seem obvious, but unfortunately, many managers fail to follow up. Ask the person to check in with you regularly, or set up a time and date in the future to check progress. It may be helpful to ask the employee if he has someone that he'd like you to enlist in the effort. Weintraub suggests you ask:

“Is there anyone you trust who can provide me with feedback about how well you’re doing in making these changes?” Doing this sends a positive message: “It says I want this to work and I want you to feel comfortable; I’m not going to sneak around your back.”

Respect confidentiality

Along the way, it’s important to keep what’s happening confidential — while also letting others know you’re working on the underperformance problem. Manzoni admits that this is a tricky line to tow. Don’t discuss the specific details with others, he says. But you might tell them something like: “Bill and I are working together on his output and lately we’ve had good discussions. I need your help in being as positive and supportive as you can.”

If there isn’t improvement, take action

If things don’t get better, change the tenor of the discussion. “At some point you leave coaching and get into the consequences speech. You might say, ‘Let me be very clear that this is the third time this has happened and since your behavior hasn’t changed, I need to explain the consequences,’” says Weintraub. Disciplinary actions, particularly letting someone go, shouldn’t be taken lightly. “When you fire somebody, it not only affects that person, but also you, the firm, and everybody around you,” says Manzoni.

While it may be painful to fire someone, it may be the best option for your team. “It’s disheartening if you see the person next to you not performing,” says Weintraub. Manzoni elaborates: “The person you’re asking to leave is only one of the stakeholders. The people left behind are the more important ones . . . When people feel the process is fair, they’re willing to accept a negative outcome.”

Praise and reward positive change

Of course if the person makes positive changes, say so. Make clear that you’re noticing the developments and reward him accordingly. “At some point, if the non-performer has improved, be sure to take them off the death spiral. You want a team that can make mistakes and learn from them,” says Weintraub.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Take action as soon as possible — the sooner you intervene the better
- Consider how you might be contributing to the performance issues
- Make a concrete, measurable plan for improvement

Don’t:

- Forget to follow up — monitor their progress regularly
- Waste your time trying to coach someone who is unwilling to admit that there’s an issue

- Talk about specific performance issues with others on the team

Case study#1: Be ready to invest time

Allie Rogovin managed a five-person team at Teach for America when she brought in Max* as a recruiting coordinator. The job had two main responsibilities: completing administrative duties that supported the recruiting team and managing special projects. Allie recognized that the administrative component wasn't that exciting. "So I let him know that the better and faster he completed these tasks, the more time he'd have for the fun projects," she says. But before long, Max was struggling with the core part of his role. "I realized a couple months into the job he wasn't getting his administrative duties done in time," she says.

Allie started by giving Max an action plan template. She asked him to take 20 minutes at the end of each day to enter and prioritize all of his tasks. She then reviewed his list every evening and gave him input on how he might shuffle his priorities for the next day. They also started meeting three times a week instead of just once a week.

"He was a very valuable team member and I knew he could do a good job. That made me want to invest time in working with him," she says. She continued meeting with Max regularly and reviewing his priorities for three months. "I didn't think it was going to be that long but I wanted to see that he was building new habits," says Allie. Max still occasionally missed deadlines but he was showing definite signs of improvement. "We tweaked the plan along the way and he eventually got into the swing of things," she says.

"I frankly wouldn't have done it if I didn't see huge potential in him," says Allie.

Case study #2: Make clear what needs to change

Bill Wright*, a business developer at a residential building company, hired a new project manager last summer. We'll call him Jack. Right from the start, Bill saw performance issues. One of Jack's primary responsibilities was to develop small projects. That meant defining the scope of the project, talking with homeowners, negotiating with subcontractors, and coordinating with design professionals. "He was taking too long to get things done. What should've taken days, was taking three to four weeks," Bill says. This was problematic for many reasons: "I was supposed to be billing his time to the client but I couldn't bill for the amount of time he was putting in. Plus I had disgruntled homeowners who were wondering why things were taking so long."

Bill met with Jack weekly to review the current workload, prioritize tasks, and resolve any issues. "I wanted to help him move things forward but eventually I got so frustrated that I started to take projects over," Bill says. At Jack's 90-day review, Bill had a frank conversation with his employee about the consequences of not being able to turn around his performance. "When I asked what he needed, Jack said that he wanted more than an hour of my time each week to get more input on his work. I said I was happy to do that and asked him to go ahead and schedule a regular meeting time," Bill says. But Jack never followed up or put any additional time on Bill's calendar.

“It was very clear that it wasn’t working out. There were never signs of any progress.” That’s when Bill sat Jack down and made it clear that his job was on the line. Again, there was no change in behavior, so several weeks later, he let Jack go. “I look back on it and realize I made a bad hire. I recently hired his replacement and it’s like night and day. He already gets the job.”

*Not their real names

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the [HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict at Work](#). She [writes and speaks](#) about workplace dynamics. Follow her on Twitter at [@amyegallo](#).
