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TIM MACPHERSON/GETTY IMAGES

It's normal to underperform on occasion. After all, everyone has an off quarter — or even an off year — from time to time. But don't just sit back and wait for that painful performance review. You need to have a conversation with your manager sooner rather than later. How should you position the news? How can you maintain your reputation while being honest? And what sort of explanation — if any — should you give?

What the Experts Say

When you're having a bad time at work — your big project isn't coming together as planned or you're missing your sales targets by a wide margin — talking to your manager may be the last thing you want to do. But you shouldn't shy away from the topic, according to Jean-François Manzoni, president of IMD and the author of *The Set-Up to Fail Syndrome*. “You don't want your boss annoyed at you and wondering” about what's going on, he says. It can be a tricky conversation, however. Dick Grote, a management consultant and author of *How to Be Good at Performance Appraisals*, says you must do two things to preserve your professional standing. First, “come clean” about your underperformance “before your boss has had a chance to discover it another way,” and second, focus on “solutions, not excuses.” Here are some ways to think about — and prepare for — the discussion.

Reflect

The first step in owning up to your underperformance is determining the source of the problem. For starters, says Manzoni, you need to consider “whether you really *are* underperforming.” Often our efforts don't “immediately translate into desired organizational outcomes.” In other words, “you could be doing all the right things but, unfortunately, it's taking a long time for it to lead to positive results.” Look at what both the “leading and lagging indicators” tell you. If both point to underperformance, Grote recommends a period of “soul-searching.” You need to figure out if this “is a one-off situation or more of a trend.” If the missed goals are an anomaly or due to extenuating circumstances that's one thing, but if they're indicative of a pattern, they ought to “[trigger some career thinking](#),” he says. This bad stretch might mean that “you are really struggling” and perhaps in “need of more development,” he says. It could also mean that “you're not in the right job.” (More on this below.)

Prepare

Next, says Grote, you need to think about your underperformance from your boss's perspective. Ask yourself, how will my boss react to this news? “If you have a [boss who has a propensity to blow up](#), you need to prepare for that,” he says. “You don't want to go in naïvely thinking ‘I hope my boss is in a good mood today.’” Think especially about how you will explain what happened, says Manzoni. It could be, for instance, that you “took a risk” that didn't pan out as you'd hoped. “You thought the market would turn. The odds were good. It was a reasonable bet, but it didn't work out.” Or maybe you're dealing with an outside distraction — an ailing parent, for instance — that's the reason you're “not at your best.” A “reasonable boss will be able to understand that,” he says.

Own up

When the time comes to talk to your boss, be straightforward and direct, says Grote. “Start the conversation by saying, ‘I have some bad news for you.’” Doing so “rivets the person's attention” and ensures “no mixed messages.” Second, “appropriately express contrition and remorse.” A sincere “I'm sorry” goes a long way. Finally, segue into how you can make it right. “Focus on correction, not blaming, shaming, or fault finding,” he says. It's natural to get defensive in these situations but do your best to avoid listing excuses. In [difficult discussions](#) like these, it's natural to want to end on an optimistic note. And yet, “there are some conversations that won't have a positive outcome,” says

Grote. For this reason, he advises that you “ought not give too much thought about how to put a happy sheen on things.” The bottom line: “Don’t try to circumnavigate the problem.”

Ask for advice

As you offer ideas and suggestions on how to improve the situation, it’s worthwhile to [ask your manager for guidance](#), according to Manzoni. “Asking your boss for advice shows that you respect your boss’s intellect and that you trust your boss,” he says. Asking for assistance is “flattering to your boss,” but you shouldn’t be obsequious, adds Grote. He suggests saying something like, “Here’s what occurs to me to make sure this doesn’t happen again. Does this make sense to you? How else would you handle this?”

Think long term

If your underperformance is representative of a bigger problem, you need to address it. This will be a separate and “longer conversation” with your manager, says Grote. He recommends saying, “When we get over this hump, I’d like to schedule a time to talk with you about the implications of this and what I can do in the long term to make sure it never happens again.” Possible interventions include more frequent check-ins or some sort of training to boost your skills. Your underperformance might also be a sign that you need to find a position at your company that’s better suited to your strengths. In this case, Manzoni advises talking to your boss about a possible move. “Say, ‘I appreciate your trust and support. I’m trying hard, but I am still struggling,’” he says. If you “establish your good intentions,” hopefully your boss can support you in identifying and transitioning to a more suitable role.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Try to figure out the source of the problem by engaging in some soul-searching.
- Offer ideas on how to improve the situation and ask your manager for guidance.
- Resist any overly optimistic impulses. It’s not worth trying to put a positive spin on your underperformance.

Don’t:

- Wing it. Prepare what you’ll say and think about how your boss will react.
- Mince words. Begin the conversation with “I have some bad news for you.” This ensures no mixed messages.
- Ignore red flags. If you’re struggling, it might mean that you need more frequent check-ins with your boss, more development, or a job change.

Case Study #1: Admit your mistakes and generate ideas on how to improve

Matt Lee works at ResumeGo, a resume writing service company. Matt joined the company in 2016

and has consistently been a strong performer — until he recently found himself in an unexpected slump. The company offers money back guarantees for clients who are not satisfied with its products, and a little over 10% of his clients had asked for refunds. “This was the highest percentage of unsatisfied clients I’d ever had,” he says. “I had to explain it to my boss.”

First, he thought about the source of the problem. “A lot of the issues stemmed from a lack of communication with my clients,” he says.

In looking back, he noted that several of his clients said they didn’t like the formatting of their new resume. “I realized that if I had simply showed them the format I was going to use beforehand and explained the reasoning behind why I chose that format, this [trouble] could have been avoided.”

Second, he thought about how his boss would react and prepared what he was going to say. “More refunds requested by customers ultimately means less revenue for the company, so I was definitely nervous [to talk to my boss],” he says.

Matt began the conversation by “openly acknowledging” that there was a problem. “I wanted my supervisor to know that I was very serious about finding ways to improve my performance.”

Matt says he didn’t want to come across as defensive in trying to justify his poor performance, but he also wanted to make sure his manager understood his perspective. “While I acknowledged that there were things I could have done differently, I also defended the specific decisions I made with regards to how I wrote each resume,” he says. “I’m the expert here when it comes to how to write and design resumes, so I can’t simply alter my standards every time a client disagrees with how I approach their resume.”

Ultimately his boss agreed with many of Matt’s points. “It’s important with these kinds of issues to stand your ground and justify your actions — especially when you are confident in the decisions that you made.”

Matt ended the conversation with ideas on how to improve. “I had a list of things I could do that would potentially increase my customer satisfaction numbers,” he says. “These mainly revolved around communicating with clients more extensively at the very start before making certain decisions about their resumes.”

Since the conversation with his boss, Matt has worked on his communication with clients, and his customer satisfaction numbers have improved as a result. “I think that particular quarter was likely just an outlier,” he says.

Case Study #2: Work together with your boss to improve your performance

Each January, Tracy Nguyen, an online media relations associate at Tiny Pulse, a Seattle-based

startup that provides technology to assess employee morale, sits down with her boss to outline her goals for the coming year.

“This way I am always able to track my performance,” she says. “As many PR practitioners, my main responsibility is managing brand reputation through generating positive media coverage. Last May, I did not meet a monthly goal of securing seven unique instances of press coverage.”

She reflected on the reasons for her missed goal. “I sat back and looked at all of my approach methods to see what was working, what was not, and what needed to be improved.”

She figured out that her long pitch needed work. “It was not getting the attention of my target journalists,” she says.

Second, she did a lot of research on how to improve her pitching. She also sought advice from her peers on how she could get better at it. Then she prepared what she would say to her boss.

When it came time for the meeting, she told her boss that she missed her objective. She apologized for falling below expectations but then launched into a discussion of what she would do to improve. “I wanted to bring this to my manager’s attention instead of waiting to be asked about what holds me back,” she says. “I was determined to lead with possible solutions.”

Tracy also asked her boss for suggestions on how to enhance her pitching skills. “Together, we came up with a solution to try an 80/20 method, which means spending 80% of the time targeting middle-tier publications and 20% on top-tier ones,” she says.

To measure the effectiveness of this method, they compared the impact of the new practice to the previous one. “As a result, two months later I exceeded my goal,” she says.

Rebecca Knight is a freelance journalist in Boston and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in The New York Times, USA Today, and The Financial Times.
