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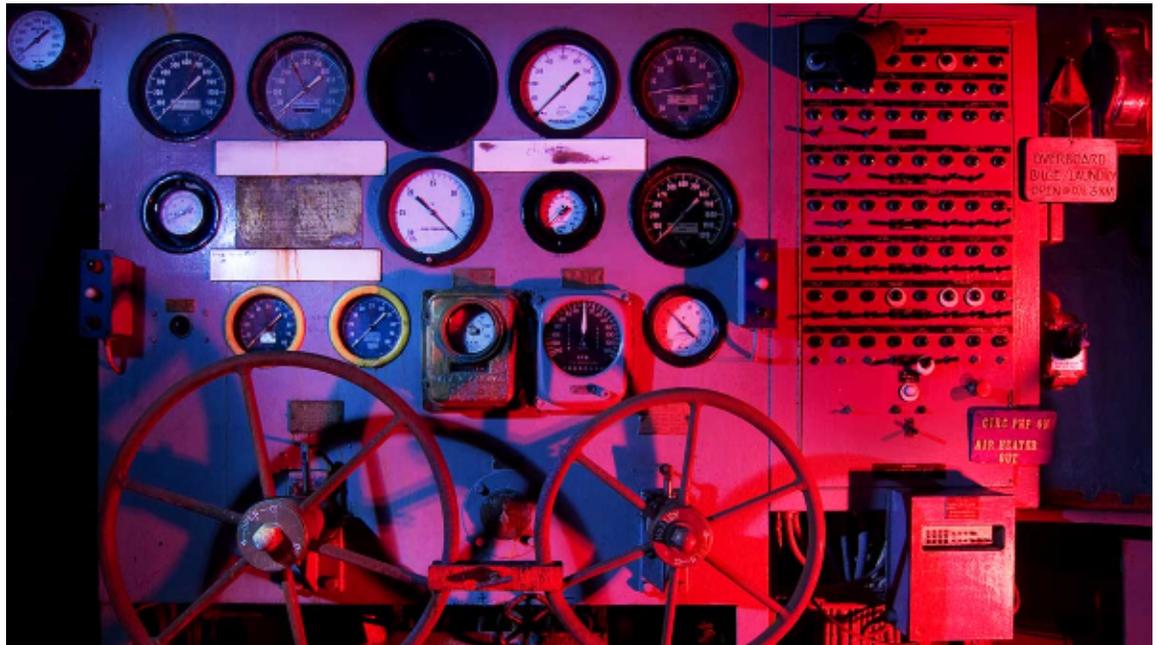## ARTICLE
DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES

How to Get an Employee to Work Faster

by Carolyn O'Hara

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There is no doubt that the pace of work everywhere has increased. We're all expected to do more in less time. So what do you do if you have a tortoise on your team? How do you diagnose why he takes so long to get his work done? And how do you then help him understand the importance of picking up the pace — and support him in doing so?

What the Experts Say

A slower worker doesn't just reduce a team's productivity — he can also hurt his colleagues' morale, says Lindsay McGregor, the coauthor of *Primed to Perform* and co-founder of Vega Factor. "When everyone is under pressure to deliver, anything that is holding a team back can become really

demotivating." Yet scaring people into speeding up will only end up backfiring, says Elizabeth Grace Saunders, a time coach and the founder of Real Life E Time Coaching & Training. "You want to be a partner in the improvement process," she says, and show the employee that working more quickly is also about making him the most successful employee he can be — which is good not only for his work product but for his advancement.

Find the source of the sluggishness

There can be so many different reasons why someone is slower than you would like. But even if you have an idea of the root of the problem, the best path forward is to simply ask. Don't go into the conversation with preconceived ideas. Your employee might be struggling with a new task, or be so much of a perfectionist that she's devoting too much time to certain projects. She might be slow because she's waiting on late work from other team members, or she may not even realize that she's not meeting expectations. "Start with assuming positive intent," says McGregor. "Assume this person wants to do a good job and if they knew how, they would." If you approach the conversation with curiosity, you'll be better positioned to brainstorm workable, effective solutions.

Set clear, specific expectations

It may be that your lagging worker doesn't even realize that he's slow, in part because he doesn't understand what's expected of him. "One of the most difficult things for someone to learn in a new role is figuring out what 'good' looks like," says McGregor. "It takes a lot of effort on the part of a manager to show someone what that is." Rather than haranguing a worker for a late financial report, sit down and create a specific schedule for deliverables. Give her guidance on where you want her to emphasize her time, and also how long something should take. Someone who is a perfectionist will also benefit from clear deadlines. "People who are perfectionists have a really hard time differentiating between where perfection matters and when it doesn't," says Saunders. That means it's up to you to highlight goals, even if it feels at first like micromanaging.

Eliminate roadblocks and hurdles

There may be impediments to an employee's workflow that you aren't even aware of. Getting work done in a timely fashion can be impossible, for instance, if an employee has a steady parade of people coming by his office asking for help or advice. Or you may learn that your lagging employee doesn't have all the software or equipment that he needs to do his job effectively. "Sometimes systems are outdated, or workers simply don't know how to use the tools that they have and they need training," says Saunders. Your worker may be doing some tasks manually, for instance, that would be more quickly done with digital tools. Or she may need regular access to a printer that is all the way across the office. Ask detailed questions about her process, and jointly look for solutions that could help her speed up her workflow. Once you find out where the blockages are, brainstorm ways to clear them and then clearly show your support for those efforts.

Avoid weaponizing data

You may have lots of data at the ready that shows how a certain worker performs at a snail's pace compared to her colleagues. But such information can be used for both good and ill, says McGregor. If

you use such data in the right way — say, as a nudge that focuses the employee on customer results — it may help her improve her work habits over time. "But if you embarrass people with it, or use it for explicit rewards, people will take shortcuts to meet goals in name, but not spirit," she says. Since you are trying to avoid a confrontational stance anyway, you should also avoid using data as a cudgel to get the results you want.

Divide large assignments into smaller ones

Break projects down into smaller deliverables and check in at predetermined deadlines to make sure everything's proceeding smoothly. This strategy can particularly help with procrastinators, says Saunders. "Breaking it down into smaller parts can help people that struggle with procrastination to feel a greater sense of urgency and to follow through in a more timely manner." Research has found that the sense of progress generated by small wins also helps employees stay motivated.

Find projects they enjoy

When you take the time to find out what people enjoy doing, you'll often find what they are best at. Assigning workers to more projects that they enjoy will naturally improve their work performance. "People absolutely can slow down because of burnout," says Saunders. "They can slow down because of being bored by things, or not enjoying what they're doing." If you have the flexibility to offer assignments that you know they enjoy doing, you're likely to end up with faster, more productive workers.

Don't forget to offer feedback

Even if you've done an effective job getting to the root of the problem and helping a slower employee look for smart shortcuts, your most important task as a manager is to follow up and offer feedback. If they've improved, make sure you tell them so — and often, says McGregor. "And remember to connect the improvements to their personal development and their ability to advance and grow on the job," she says. Similarly, if you can find ways to recognize that person or their team as a reward for improved behavior, do it, says Saunders. "One of the ways in which people are most motivated is actually their accountability to their colleagues," she says. "If there is some sort of group reward for a team doing things on time or up to speed, that can actually be incredibly motivating."

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Come to the table with curiosity about why the employee is working more slowly than others. You may be surprised by the actual reason.
- Be clear about specific goals and deadlines to help them understand what you expect of them.
- Offer them projects and tasks they enjoy doing. Happy workers are naturally faster workers.

Don't:

- Confront them with data on how they are slow compared to others. That strategy will likely kill their motivation and morale, or lead to shortcuts with unanticipated consequences.
- Leave it all to them to make changes to their environment or workflow. Help them brainstorm solutions and get them updated tools if they need them.
- Forget to follow up by recognizing their improved performance or by asking what else can be done to assist them.

Case Study #1: Support your perfectionists and look for time-saving tools

Mike Catania, co-founder of the savings site PromotionCode.org, had an employee who was both the best and the worst. She worked in data entry confirming promotion codes that were then offered to the site's customers, and she dominated the accuracy rankings for employees, regularly posting nearly 100 percent accuracy rates for her entries, compared to an 80 percent average for her peers. But she would only submit about half the expected numbers because she was such a perfectionist. Dates and descriptions would be triple checked, and she would call the stores to confirm promotions — something her faster colleagues rarely did.

"Our 'tortoise' was neither lazy nor lacked understanding of the expectations," says Catania. "She was unquestionably the most skillful of our team, which was why getting her to simply work faster was so crucial."

Catania sat down with the employee several times to get her to work faster, but it was always a difficult conversation, because the quality of her work was beyond reproach. "I enabled her to some degree," he says. "She was so good that I figured, why should I jeopardize her performance or micromanage her? So we tolerated it."

A breakthrough came when the company invested in an internal system that could validate a lot of the data entry work automatically. After a few months, the employee became confident enough with the new system to let go of her tried-and-true routines. "Even now, she's still one of the slower data entry people," says Catania, "but having a system that supported her work improved her speed by about 30 percent, enough to push her speed into an acceptable range."

The bottom line, Catania says: "Make systems that support your best people as soon as you know they're your best people."

Case Study #2: Set clear expectations and check-in regularly

After Larissa Nonni, the case manager at a Florida immigration firm, took a brief medical leave, she returned to work to widespread complaints that a new assistant was too slow for the office's pace. "Translations were lagging, clients were not getting their calls returned, and immigration application forms were taking forever to finish," she says. As the team leader, it fell to Larissa to address the situation.

Rather than calling out the assistant's lagging performance, Larissa instituted a new policy, under the guise of getting more organized. It involved a brief one-on-one Monday morning meeting to go over that week's case load and tasks. "I would go down the list with her about what was pending for each client, and I'd give her a deadline for each one," Larissa says. By the end of the first week, the assistant's performance had already markedly improved. She still wasn't as familiar with the details of cases as some of the other employees who had been working in the office longer, but she was working faster and meeting deadlines. Larissa made sure to compliment her performance and tell her she was a valued member of the team.

"I realized that she probably didn't even realize she was lagging at first," says Larissa. Without clear expectations, "how could she know?"

Carolyn O'Hara is a writer and editor based in New York City. She's worked at The Week, PBS NewsHour, and Foreign Policy. Follow her on Twitter at @carolynohara1.