Uncovering Causes of Poor Performance

One of the most difficult jobs for a leader can be dealing with poor employee performance. When poor performance is not properly diagnosed and confronted, the costs are great.

To analyze sub-standard employee performance, there are four primary elements to consider: is the performance problem a matter of awareness, resources, ability, effort, or a combination of those? The practice of asking good questions (of yourself and of your employee) will help you uncover the root cause of an employee’s performance issue. It is critical to determine the true cause of the performance problem, in order to identify the most effective course of action and to help the employee discover their own best solutions. In this way, you will avoid a major leadership mistake: rushing in to solve the problem without first determining the cause. The best solutions will help overcome underlying issues that have been hindering performance success to date.

**AWARENESS**

Does the employee know a performance problem exists? Have performance expectations been clearly communicated? Are there any conflicting or contradictory directives? A leader can help the employee spotlight a gap in performance by clarifying the difference between what performance is expected and what is currently happening. Sometimes it’s helpful to draw a visual diagram of the “desired state” vs. the “current state,” to clearly illustrate the performance gap:

\[ \text{GAP} = \text{discrepancy (gap) between “what performance should be” and “what performance currently is”} \]

This graphic ensures the employee knows what “good performance” looks like (the goal), and precisely the extent to which they are failing to meet expectations.
Once performance expectations have been effectively communicated and the employee agrees that there is a gap, consider the following three “root causes” to poor performance. This process will help you and the employee determine why the performance gap exists and brainstorm alternate solutions. Just telling the employee to “fix the gap” will not usually trigger improvement or commitment. By discussing how to fix the gap, while encouraging the employee’s input and perspective, you will both benefit from sustainable improvement. High employee involvement in this process will increase their ownership of both the problem and the solution.

**RESOURCES**

COULD the employee perform if they had adequate resources? In busy work places, there may be obstacles negatively impacting performance that are outside the employee’s control. The most common resource limitations to investigate include:

- Time
- Budget
- Staffing
- Equipment, technology, tools
- Authority
- Balanced feedback
- Access to current information
- Updated processes

As a leader, when you recognize the employee could perform with adequate resources, it is your job to help provide those resources. If resource allocation is beyond your ability to control, then the performance expectation should be adjusted. Otherwise, you’re essentially setting employees up to fail.

If resources are adequate yet the employee’s performance is not at a satisfactory level, address the next two factors: ability and effort.

**ABILITY**

CAN the employee perform? If their life literally depended upon performing, do they have the skills and knowledge to do it? Has the employee performed this task adequately in the past? From their experience, can the employee suggest ideas to help improve performance? Is additional training available?
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If the two of you decide that the employee’s performance gap is due to a lack of knowledge and skills, there are a variety of possible solutions to entertain:

- Formal training: classroom, mentor, on-the-job instruction, self-study, video, refresher course if time has elapsed since last training, etc.
- Informal learning opportunities: more opportunities to practice, role play, projects that allow application of the skills, research topic to present at a staff meeting, task force assignment, etc.
- Provide job aids (visual reminders, policy manuals, checklists, other documents to refer to “on the job,” etc.)
- Identify the employee’s learning style preference (reader, talker, observer, hands-on, etc.) to target the best training techniques.

If the employee has adequate knowledge and skills, AND has been able to perform in the past, perhaps they are losing motivation. In this case, discuss these approaches:

- Discuss when motivation to perform decreased. What else changed to impact the skill gap? For example, perhaps something new in their personal life is impacting work life or they are having a conflict with another employee.
- Ask if they are growing bored with routine tasks. Would it be rejuvenating to receive additional activities, projects, or opportunities? Add expanded duties to their job description.
- Evaluate job “fit”; look for positions that better leverage their interests and strengths
- Promote to a position of more responsibility

If the performance gap is not a function of inadequate knowledge and skills, it may be a motivational problem.

**EFFORT**

WILL the employee perform? When given an option, do they choose to perform? What happens when the job is (or is not done) correctly? Are there practices in place to reward positive performance? Are there negative consequences for poor performance? What about the opposite: are there any ways in which strong performance is discouraged (for example, peer pressure to “take it easy” or “slack off”)? A leader’s job is to ensure that consequences are appropriate and consistent for good and poor performance.
If the employee has high skills and knowledge, but is lacking in motivation, try some of these approaches:

- Ask the employee why their effort is low. Ask what would motivate more effort.
- Consistently provide positive incentives and negative consequences
- Shift/add job responsibilities
- Check priorities
- Investigate the possibility of conflicting expectations

If the employee has poor skills and knowledge despite attempts to teach them, AND has low motivation and effort:

- Consider job transfer where their skills and motivations would be better utilized for the organization
- Evaluate job fit and whether this employee was a poor selection for the position
- Counsel – Ask why effort is low. Ask how much they want to keep their position.
- Forecast the future of their career. Use consequence statements: “If you continue to perform in this way, this will be the result... It is your choice. How do you want to proceed?”
- Take corrective disciplinary action, documenting discussions and actions, as per your organization’s policy
- In extreme cases, prepare for employment termination

When employee performance requires improvement, the leadership you provide can make the difference between success and failure. How you resolve a performance gap will depend in significant part upon its cause. Sometimes there are multiple solutions to a given performance gap. Any solution should be flexible, as new needs may emerge. Evaluate all the alternatives generated during discussions with your employee to determine the best way to solve the performance gap. Mutually agree on the steps to be taken, and document your action plan with realistic timelines. Make sure the employee understands that the responsibility for correcting the performance gap is in their hands. Follow up to give effective feedback and encouragement.