



DEALING WITH A WORKER'S SLACK PERFORMANCE

REQUIRES CANDOR

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Have you ever had an employee who was not performing properly? Possibly you recall an employee with all the talent needed to produce big results who did not live up to his or her potential. You may remember a previously successful and dependable employee whose results have been slipping recently.

It's easy to identify these people, but it can be very difficult to correct the problem and energize them. Managers must understand the difference between a temporary period of low performance and a true performance problem. Many times identifying a problem is difficult because the natural ebb and flow of business and even working in a group or depending on others' actions may camouflage the problem.

Typically, when managers sense a problem they try two approaches. Many take a "hands-off" approach, hoping the person will solve the problem on his or her own. Others continually encourage the person to keep a positive attitude and ask them to perform. These methods rarely produce the easy solution the manager is looking for and even less frequently yield long-term results.

Employees need objective feedback and management to resolve performance problems because many do not see themselves or their actions clearly nor realize they must meet performance goals, targets or minimum expectations. Regardless of tenure or experience, an employee will produce greater results with effective management.

It is important to note that a short-term lack of results is not always an indication of a problem with the employee. It may be caused by a variety of factors, such as the support of others, a change in job conditions, or even an illness. A true performance problem is indicated by consistent lower results as compared to realistic expectations based on past results in similar situations, or compared to others with similar training and tenure.

Lack of information, tools, or resources may be a cause, but it may go much deeper. True performance problems are triggered by a variety of situations, but their root causes can usually be traced to the key areas of poorly defined expectations, a lack of skill and knowledge, or failure by management to provide direction, guidance, or accountability.

If an employee doesn't know what is expected, he or she can't fulfill it. If the employee does not

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have the skill or knowledge to be capable of meeting or exceeding expectations, there can never be a sustained high performance.

Even though many people think the root of problems is a lack of skill and knowledge, frequently it is not. One of the most common reasons for a performance problem is management's failure to provide direction, guidance, and most of all, accountability for employee's actions. Today, self-directed work teams are in vogue; however, even in there direction is provided and there is self-policing.

A manager begins correcting a performance problem by ensuring that what is expected is not only reasonable, but also clear to the employee. Next, the manager ensures the individual has the skill and knowledge to meet those expectations.

Finally, the manager must ensure that the employee has direction and guidance. Direction may partially come from the procedures and practices in place or what is learned from others. However, it is up to the manager to be sure the employee clearly knows what must be done, when it must be done, and how well it should be done. Nothing substitutes for this direct leadership and management involvement.

The following are questions you can ask to help identify the root of a performance problem and determine the solution.

- Does the employee clearly know what is expected?
- Has the employee performed at the expectation before? (If yes, skill is not an issue)
- Has the job recently changed significantly?
- Does the employee have the knowledge to perform?
- Does the employee have the skill to perform? If not, can the employee develop the skill in a reasonable time?
- If the employee has performed up to expectation in the past, was performance rewarded?
- If the employee does not perform or meet expectations, is there a penalty or negative consequence?
- Has the employee been given performance feedback and counseled as to the potential results if the current performance level continues?
- Has the employee been kept informed, and has that been in writing?
- Does the employee know that if the problem is not resolved, it could jeopardize his or her employment?

Once employees clearly know what is expected, it is up to the manager to ensure the employee fulfills them. If performance falls below standards or the employee fails to perform in any area, the manager must quickly take action to hold the employee accountable. In short, if the level of performance required is not met or achieved, there must be a penalty.

Do you have employees who under-perform, don't carry their share of the load, or let others

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down? If they are not performing up to expectations, what have you done to ensure this is corrected?

We must look at our own performance, not just employees' performance. Are you performing up to expectations?

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