

Managing Poor Performance



It is imperative to address unacceptable performance as soon as it becomes apparent, before the situation deteriorates or the opportunity to address the issue disappears. If left too late, options are often reduced to a range of 'blunt' tools (discipline, transfer or termination), which can prove to be extremely costly to both the enterprise and the individual in question.

At work, managing poor performance is really a combination of two things:

- **Static poor performance** management is about having a clear and fair framework within which everyone can work. This involves clear and fair rules on unacceptable behavior, safety, timekeeping etc, as well as agreed standards of work for all employees.
- **Dynamic poor performance** management is about actively ensuring that all rules and standards are kept and, if they are not, taking action to close the gap between required and actual performance.

This short booklet provides general guidance on how to handle unacceptable performance in a positive and constructive manner (wherever possible short of formal discipline). However, the aim is also to give specific guidance on what steps may need to be taken when the performance shortfall has become significantly more serious, and a more formal (and typically written) approach has to be taken.

1

Avoid

Taking corrective action does not mean meting out punishment. The purpose of taking corrective action is to get the individual back on track, and to help them improve, not to make them feel bad or penalize them. Taking corrective action is therefore an integral part of the on-going performance management process, with the genuine hope and intention that most people will quickly improve and even become “high performing” again. In this regard, a useful early framework for managers to consider consists of four classifications of reasons why poor performance may be occurring in an individual.

- **Can't problems** are generally a lack of aptitude (the capacity to learn and/or do the job), and are best avoided by selecting the right people for the right job, as motivational techniques and training will rarely result in improvement in this situation
- **Won't problems** are generally lack of motivation issues and can be overcome by listening to the employee and then leading them ‘safely’ forward through persuasion and incentive.
- **Don't know** problems generally arise from lack of information (or sometimes plain ignorance). In such cases, simple communication can be all that is needed.
- **Don't know how** problems are generally associated with a lack of training. Unlike communication, training needs more time and the opportunity to work together collaboratively.

This simple framework helps us to focus on what might be wrong in performance terms and also helps to ensure that we have not been guilty of putting out mixed messages or creating confusion in terms of what is expected of individuals.



2

Recognize

The list of what constitutes poor performance will vary greatly between different types of organizations. This has the potential to cause problems for individuals (especially if the rules are not well communicated). As a result, the use of a detailed framework can help to clarify the issue by separating performance problems into four category types. Detailed descriptions of the category types are as follows (these are portrayed in a summary chart below).

PERSONAL BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

These usually relate specifically to an individual (rather than to whole groups of people or to problems between different people). Personal behavior problems typically involve an individual failing to manage themselves in an appropriate way when they may be reasonably expected to do so (without any supervision or direction from others).

RELATING TO OTHERS PROBLEMS

These issues usually relate to conflicts or disputes between two or more individuals in the enterprise, that have gone beyond so-called 'normal' to 'healthy' disagreements. The less serious end of this scale is difficult to define as it will often be highly situationally dependent and may vary according to the culture or values of the enterprise. However, **rude language, shouting and talking unkindly behind people's backs** may be the sort of problems encountered.

Four Types of Poor Performance

<p style="text-align: center;">Personal Behavior Problems</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RELATIVELY MINOR ISSUES Poor personal hygiene, persistent lateness, sickness etc.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RELATIVELY MAJOR ISSUES Alcohol or drug abuse etc.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Relating to Others Problems</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RELATIVELY MINOR ISSUES Spreading rumors, rude language to others etc.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RELATIVELY MAJOR ISSUES Bullying, sexual harassment etc.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Work Competence Problems</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RELATIVELY MINOR ISSUES Sloppily presented, poor quality work, important deadlines missed etc.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RELATIVELY MAJOR ISSUES Serious incompetence or lack of duty of care in work causing serious consequences etc.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Law/Rule Breaking Problems</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RELATIVELY MINOR ISSUES Breaking basic safety rules, exceeding expenditure authority etc.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RELATIVELY MAJOR ISSUES Misappropriation of funds, causing malicious damage to assets</p>

2 Recognize

WORK COMPETENCE PROBLEMS

Even though they are usually less visible than some of the more serious personal or relationship based problems, work competence generally covers the vast majority of poor performance issues. However, once again, what constitutes a lack of competence will vary greatly from one enterprise to another and action to do anything about it is equally variable.

RULE/LAW BREAKING PROBLEMS

These usually relate to clear breaches of written guidelines or regulations that individuals are reasonably expected to follow. At one end of this scale are what may be seen as **minor contraventions of internal policy or procedure** that a particular enterprise does not want to see repeated or widely copied by others. However, even procedural contraventions can have significant consequences when it comes to spending the organization's money or harming people or assets etc. Most seriously in this category, individuals can act illegally by **stealing, or causing malicious damage to equipment** for example.

It could also be the case that an individual's illegal actions outside their place of work (in their personal time) may result in disciplinary action being taken, including termination of employment. For example, a sales representative may have been successfully prosecuted for drunk driving, and being now unable to travel flexibly has his or her employment terminated.

These four categories are not intended to be rigid segregations, as it is clear that some performance problems may involve more than one category, depending upon the circumstances. For example, a fight between two intoxicated employees on work premises at a work party, causing damage to some office equipment and rendering both of them unable to come to work for several days is likely to fit into all four categories. However, this is quite an extreme case and for the most part these four categories are useful not only for

distinguishing between different types of problems but perhaps more importantly to encourage managers to think about the different approaches that are likely to be the most successful in each case.

