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9 Ways To Manage Underperforming Employees

 JULY 18TH, 2018

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Are you frustrated by the impact of poor performers on the spirit and success of your team?

If so, you're far from alone.

Research by the Centre for Creative Leadership, spanning China/Hong Kong, Egypt, India, Singapore, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, identified six common challenges middle and senior managers face.

Out of these six challenges reported, five of them are related to leading people: inspiring others, developing employees, leading a team, guiding change and managing internal stakeholders.

Here are some important steps you can take when faced with either an underperforming individual or team.

1. **Assume the role of coach**

Commit to doing your part to help people improve. There's no shortcut to success, so invest in coaching and provide your team with the strength of leadership they need.

2. **Leave no room for doubt**

Set very clear expectations about the standards of performance you want to see. Focus not only on what people are expected to achieve but also on how they are expected to go about doing it.

Building the culture that will most likely enable your whole team to thrive demands equal focus on results and behaviours.

3. **Face reality and act early**

All too often, leaders overlook early signs of underperformance. Recognise when people are getting off track or failing to deliver on reasonable expectations and choose to act.

While it's important to see the good in people, it is also crucial to make objective assessments about progress. This is preferably done as early as possible when someone assumes a new role.

4. **Engage in honest conversations**

It's common to observe managers avoiding difficult conversations about poor performance.

Edwards Deming, leading authority on management once said, "People can face almost any problem except the problem of people.... Faced with problems of people, management will go into a state of paralysis."

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However, left unaddressed, performance issues typically get worse. As soon as you become concerned about someone's performance, let him or her know. Explain why you hold the concerns that you do and offer support to help them improve.

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5. Understand the problem

To be able to support anyone in order for them to improve, you would first need to understand what's holding them back.

Begin by reflecting on the extent to which they have the capabilities required to deliver.

That is, do they have the essential knowledge, skills and experience needed to meet the expected standards of performance? Or, is the real problem, for example, the way they choose to behave?

6. Assess engagement

If it's evident that someone has the necessary knowledge and skills, next assess the extent to which they are engaged in their work and with your organisation.

According to [research](#) by Aon Hewitt, "a five percent increase in employee engagement is linked to a three percent lift in revenue a year later."

The simple truth is, no matter how talented someone is, unless they want to perform at their best, they are unlikely to do so.

7. Act with strength and compassion

Engage with respect and sensitivity, while at the same time ensure that honest insight is shared about what needs to improve.

When delivered well, the truth is a powerful gift of opportunity we give to someone for them to understand their reality and do something about it.

8. Leverage strengths

In a [study](#) of almost 50,000 teams in 45 countries, Gallup researchers discovered that those who received 'strengths interventions' increased sales by 10% to 19% and profits by 14% to 29%, compared to control groups.

While it matters to address skill gaps or ineffective behaviours, aligning people to their strengths can also have a big impact on improving performance.

9. Make tough decisions

Building a culture of accountability and high performance requires that you make necessary decisions when people fail to step up.

If, after providing fair opportunity to understand your expectations and reasonable support to improve, someone continues to underperform, then it is time to let them go.

As difficult a decision as it can be, success of the rest of your team – and ultimately the business – depends on it.

In conclusion

Prevention is always better than cure.

A Gallup Global Workplace [report](#) points out: "Businesses that orient performance management systems around basic human needs for psychological engagement, such as positive workplace relationships, frequent recognition, ongoing performance conversations and opportunities for personal development, get the most out of their employees."

Place priority on recruiting the right people into your team and then take deliberate steps to create the environment and provide the support for them to be at their best.

Karen Gately, a founder of HR Consultancy Ryan Gately, is a leadership and people-management specialist. Karen works with leaders and HR teams to drive business results through the talent and energy of people. If you have more suggestions on how to manage underproductive employees' drop us a note at editor@leaderonomics.com or for more information visit www.ryangately.com.au

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