

Help underperforming employees own their performance improvement



Most managers do not enjoy giving out negative performance reviews or having tough conversations with employees about their work. However, it's a necessary part of the job. According to one Robert Half survey, the average manager spends about 26% of their working hours coaching underperforming employees.

If not addressed, underperforming employees can hurt your business's overall productivity and morale. Additionally, getting to the bottom of an employee's poor performance can give you insight into other organizational challenges taking place. It's vital to address these situations so that they don't grow into larger problems both for the individual and the company as a whole.

Fortunately, with the right coaching and support, many of these underperformers can turn things around and even become your star employees. However, to do so you'll need to guide them through the process of identifying the problem, finding solutions, and taking ownership of their own performance and career.

Address the issue promptly

Do not wait until performance review season to address performance concerns, be proactive in addressing them before the issue grows. If an employee is allowed to underperform for an extended period, they'll likely be less eager to improve. Additionally, it leaves time for the problems to grow. Survey data suggest that employees themselves prefer timely feedback as well. [96% of employees surveyed](#) stated that they would prefer to receive

regular feedback. In particular, Gen Y and Gen Z have [indicated](#) a preference for daily or weekly feedback.

If you haven't given timely feedback in the past, it's not too late to start. Keep up with employee's performance improvement objectives on a continual basis and address problems as they arise. Ideally, employees will also be proactive and bring issues to your attention before they devolve into performance problems. However, you can also take a moment during reviews and check-ins to remind them of your support. Ask if they're struggling with any areas of their jobs and to come to you if a challenge arises in the future. This may even spur a conversation about a current issue that you weren't aware of!

Understand what motivates your employees

If you want an employee to take ownership of improving their work performance, you'll need to start by understanding what motivates them. If they are financially motivated, let them know what they need to do to earn a bonus or receive a raise at their next annual review. If it's power or status, frame the performance improvement process around helping them get to the next level in the company. Do not promise a promotion. However, you can help them understand that they need to address their current performance issues before they can move up. If they are socially motivated, finding an employee to mentor them and work together with them may be beneficial. Personalize the process to speak to their individual motivations.

Make underperforming employees part of the process

Include the employee in the development of their own performance improvement plan. Before talking to the employee, you've likely done your own research on the issue. This probably includes soliciting input from other employees that work directly with this team member. However, the employee's perspective is also valuable and should be included in the formulation of the improvement plan.

Let them know that you've identified an issue and ask for their ideas on why this might be happening. For example; "I've noticed that you have been missing deadlines recently, can you share with me what's been contributing to this? Is there something that we could do to better support you?".

Frame it as a discussion and not an accusation. In this example, there could be a few different challenges they mention, such as:

- Being given too much work.
- Having trouble focusing or staying organized
- Not fully understanding part of their work
- The deadlines are not being communicated clearly

From there, you can problem-solve together and develop a concrete performance improvement plan. Your plan should include measurable goals, progress check-ins, additional tools or training, and an assigned mentor if it would be helpful. Ensure that they know what they need to do so that they can take charge of the process for themselves with your support.

You can find a great template for creating specific, measurable goals [here](#). I recommend going through the S.M.A.R.T. goal worksheet with the employee so that you can define the problem together and collaborate on a reasonable timeline and measures of success.

Be understanding of personal factors

If the employee's performance has dropped suddenly, it may be due to something in their personal life or a change in their work life. When you talk to them about their performance, be ready to listen to their response and empathize with their circumstances.

They may be facing physical or mental health challenges, family hardships, or temporary sources of additional stress like having to move unexpectedly.

They may also be experiencing issues at work. An employee that is usually engaged and motivated suddenly performing poorly could be a sign that they are experiencing harassment or bullying at work. If they have had troubles with the switch to remote work or returning to the office, try to be supportive and problem-solve together. Be sure to use active listening and show understanding towards their situation. Being empathetic helps an employee feel like you're on their side. Encourage them to share how you can best support them and their performance.

Encourage open communication with underperforming employees

Employees are often intimidated by the idea of going to their manager for help. With underperforming employees, they are already likely aware that they are not doing well. However, the idea of having an honest conversation about their challenges may seem daunting.

One of the best ways to help an underperformer is to start an open dialogue with them. Once you've had an honest conversation about their performance issues and created the performance improvement plan together, keep the communication lines open. Conduct formal and informal check-ins that give them an opportunity to ask questions or share concerns. However, also encourage them to come to you whenever they need help.

The goal here is to support them, but also set an expectation that they actively communicate on issues as they arise. If you are checking in with them regularly and they are telling you that everything is going fine while continuing to underperform, this employee may not truly be trying to improve. The key to the success of any performance improvement effort is a willing and coachable employee. If they aren't demonstrating a commitment to improving or utilizing the resources that you are providing, it may be time to start moving towards disciplinary action.

Guide them to success

This process may not necessarily be fun, but hopefully, it will be rewarding for both the business and the employee. Taking personal responsibility for your own success and work performance makes every win more meaningful. Underperformers that actively seek to improve may become your most engaged and high-performing employees once they've learned to identify their own issues and actively seek to solve them. Finally, be certain to recognize an employee's improved performance. This kind of encouragement can give them the drive to continue improving.