How to diagnose and treat poor performance
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An effective manager knows that a bad attitude is rarely the sole explanation for poor performance. Here's how to find the real cause behind "problem employees."

How to Diagnose and Treat Poor Performance

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"Problem employees" are one of the most difficult issues faced by managers. The low performer's work group and others feel the waves of discontent, leading to complaints about their colleague(s). A manager who systematically clarifies the problem and commits to follow-through can arrive at a successful resolution for both the employee and the organization.

Performance problems appear to be similar but have numerous causes. A new employee who lacks sufficient training or experience cannot handle journey-level responsibilities. Another employee may lack fundamental capability. What about a long-time employee who has never really met standards but received little feedback, or an employee who has performed successfully in the past but has not kept up? Each scenario requires a different management tactic.

Why does a fully capable person perform poorly?

If a performer has performed well in the past but doesn't continue to do so, something has changed for the worse. A manager's job is to identify what happened and find a way to help the employee get back on track.

Alternatively, when an employee is new to a group, training, time, and relationships are the likely cures. When deadlines are pressing, patience for a newcomer may be in short supply. An effective manager reminds people the situation is temporary and enlists the help of senior members to bring the "newbie" up to speed.

Whether a newcomer or seasoned employee, six key factors point the way out of the low producer's downward spiral (also see figure on page 39):

A. Knowledge. Determine whether the employee has the information and knowledge required for the job. For example, does the individual know the advanced features of a program, how to create a strategic plan, or the cultural variables for conducting business in a foreign country? Deficiencies in basic job knowledge deepen when mistakes generate

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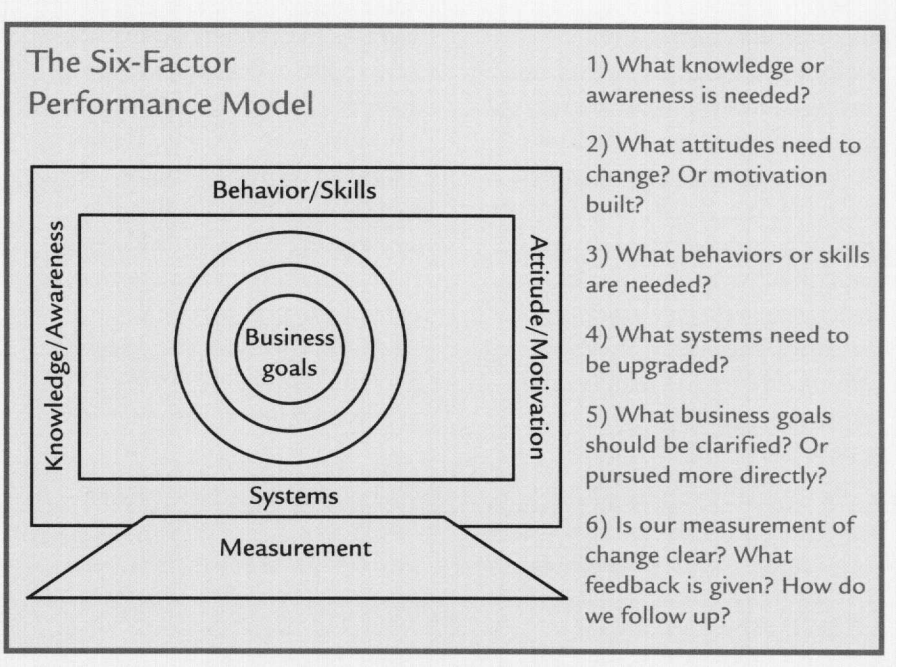
bad work group relationships, resulting in an unwillingness to share useful information.

B. Attitude. Find out about the employee's beliefs, assumptions, and values. Don't "cop out" and blame performance deficits on a bad attitude; that attitude has a cause. *Example:* A chemical plant engineer acknowledged he intentionally did the least possible work because management did not care about him and his "mates." In fact, his manager valued him highly, but had never talked with the engineer about his experience and aspirations.

A value for expediency over procedure can undermine process improvement efforts. The person may be motivated, but in the wrong way.

Evaluate the attitudes team members have toward each other and the person in question. Derogatory attitudes toward other workers undermine teamwork. It is difficult for either person to perform at their best (individually and with each other) under such a shadow of biases and stereotypes.

C. Competency and behavior. Assess whether the low performer has the technical ability, people skills, or procedural competency to perform the assignments. Beware of confusing ***knowledge*** with ***competency***. *Example:* A chemical plant operator nearly shut down a line, risking multi-million dollar losses and possible danger. He had passed knowledge tests, but alone in the control room at night became fearful and confused and pressed the wrong icon on the computer screen. The ability to perform, especially under pressure, involves adapting knowledge to practical situations and acting appropriately.



Assess accuracy on procedures and technology. Evaluate whether behavior lines up with team norms and if work habits help other team members.

The emphasis here is on practical competency and behavior suited to the position. An employee may be in the wrong position—extremely talented in some areas, but weak in others.

D. Systems. Review systems or procedures for changes that have impacted performance negatively. Perhaps the structure of a work group has altered, creating a conflict of personalities that requires swift intervention. New technology may cause the employee to feel inadequate. Scarce resources or unavailable tools cause others to perform poorly.

Perhaps the most difficult task is for managers to look at themselves as part of the "system" to see if they are contributing to problems. People respond differently to each style of management. "It is counterproductive and professionally inexcusable for a 21st century supervisor or manager not to recognize that employee work problems do not take place in a vacuum, but within an interactive system in which supervisory actions play a major role," says Paul J. Read, employee assistance program manager for California's State Compensation Insurance Fund.

E. Business goals. Find out if the employee is clear on the company's vision and specific goals, and the short-term targets of the group. *Example:* An inside salesman at a pipe manufacturer spent a long time with every customer chatting about business issues and common interests. His performance was deemed low because the new strategy was to close sales and concentrate on high volume customers.

F. Measurement. Check whether the performance measures cover all

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major aspects of the low performer's job. Employees improve through knowing what is expected and receiving accurate feedback. Review whether the weak player has tools to make self-assessments of results or progress. Then take self-corrective action. The main focus here is the adequacy of measures, the clarity of expectations, and letting people know where they stand.

"A PROACTIVE MANAGER NEEDS TO TRACK ALL WORK PROBLEMS SO THAT AN OVERLOOKED ONE-TIME ANOMALY ISN'T ALLOWED TO DEVELOP INTO A 'SUDDEN' DESTRUCTIVE WORK PATTERN."

When the whole unit is up in arms

A systematic approach can help managers maintain the confidence of their groups and leads to effective solutions. Marion E. Haynes, author of several management training books, says:

- *Take all complaints seriously.*
- *Talk to people right away.*
- *Probe for information.*
- *Listen for the real problem.*
- *Do not make employees defend their complaints.*
- *Tell them when they can expect your response.*

Avoid suggesting that groups "just work it out for themselves." Opinions about the annoying co-worker often conflict. Even self-managing teams cannot address performance issues without guidance and training.

General complaints do not help unravel the knots. The manager should ask co-workers to cite specific and recent examples of unacceptable behavior—and to acknowledge something positive. This avoids an opinion war and helps the difficult employee see exactly what is and is not the aggravating behavior, making it easier to accept or initiate ways to correct the problem.

Avoid assuming the designated person is the whole problem. Ask group members if the environment is contributing to the situation. It is crucial to alert the work group that solutions may require adjustments by others or to systems, not only changes in the individual.

Five steps to the solution

1) Assess the "here and now." Rank in order which elements of the job are being performed well and poorly. *Example:* A middle manager at a science lab informed a subordinate manager that he was admired for results, but his team complained that he was rude, likely to have angry outbursts, and made sexist remarks.

Identify the short-term and long-term impact on others. Clarify whether others are equally "to blame." Review what has been done already to address the issues. Assess whether progress has been made. Identify changes and stresses in the workplace or in the personal life of the low performer.

The employee who has never performed well, but received no feedback, requires delicate handling. Once tactfully confronted, measurable improvement is often the result. Otherwise, begin a development plan with formal performance documentation.

The focus of this step is two-fold: to develop an accurate picture of the poor performer's worklife and to provide the employee with a clear picture of what is not working.

2) Check the competency match. Evaluate current capabilities and the potential for improvement. Question whether the team is overestimating the person's capacities. Where it is cost-effective for the employee and the organization, design a development plan.

Evaluate whether the position is poorly defined and the priorities unclear. It may be ripe for redesign to fit the employee's competencies, not vice versa. Alternatively, perhaps a transfer to a more suitable position is possible. If not, the professional manager supports the unqualified employee in seeking other employment.

3) Improve the work environment. Discuss whether the employee has the resources needed to be successful, if tools are adequate. Develop work group relations and seek to resolve animosities. Empower the poor performer with buddies who can coach weak areas. Examine attitudes to diversity and related HR policies that may be impeding the individual. Assess whether this employee is clear about departmental goals and results expected of each employee.

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Heads up: identify the root cause and implement solutions

Jim's team gave him rock-bottom scores on people management. In assessing his management style, Jim could not even identify what the people issues were. A change management consultant helped Jim trace his derogatory attitudes to his father's style and see why his communication skills broke down into angry outbursts when others disagreed with him. This information provided self-insight and new techniques for handling differences. Jim and the consultant practiced leadership methods. For ongoing support, Jim identified a peer to coach him. Within two months, Jim achieved his goal—spontaneous appreciation from his team.

Although Hector was by far the most able member of his marketing team, he was easily distracted. "Oh, no! Here we go again," thought Tom as Hector burst out with another idea after a brainstorming session ended. The day before, Tom had moved his work from the office to the boardroom, citing the need for silence. Hector just couldn't sit still and continually walked to and from the coffee machine.

The company's employee relations specialist was supportive rather than judgmental. Fortunately, she was also well-read and had attended seminars on diversity in the workplace. It appeared that Hector might have ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). She persuaded Tom to make some "reasonable accommodations" (even without a formal diagnosis) such as a quieter cubicle in the corner and a supply of earplugs. Hector agreed to find a behavior control coach for help with modifying his inappropriate exuberance and verbal "productivity." Hector identified a peer to work with him to apply what he learned in his time management seminars. Tom saw positive results in Hector, including prompt attendance at meetings, more completed projects, and "zipping the lip."

4) Conduct a managerial assessment. Make sure the manager is still motivated to develop the employee and has the necessary skills. A peer or external coach is often a better choice. Managers should not assume motivation, training, or discipline techniques that worked on them will suit employees who may have different goals, needs, and responses. Sometimes managers need to learn new ways to get the best from each staff member.

Most important, the manager assesses how much he or she is a cause of the issues—ideally by asking others. As a manager, working on oneself is a high leverage way to improve performance in the whole work group.

5) Plan and work the plan. Pointing out a deficiency occasionally results in correction, but agreed-upon improvement plans are best. Include specific improvements intended, target dates, and the schedule for follow-ups. Outline the support the manager or others will offer. The difficult part is following through on this support. *Example:* A female technician with tremendous potential but a somewhat abrasive personal style nearly sued her company because her manager (of a different race) never enrolled her in the interpersonal skills training course he promised. Instead, he sent other male team members to the workshops. Managers need to do their part to help their employees make a breakthrough with well-conceived plans and follow-through.

The manager looks for improvements, gives frequent and positive feedback, and provides personal attention. Finally, he or she shows compassion, acknowledging there is more than just a job on the line.

Heads up

When talent is in such high demand, a "bad attitude" does not sufficiently explain poor performance. Thousands of bright, talented individuals are stuck in the wrong jobs, in a defeating work environment, or caught under poor management. The manager's responsibility is to work with the individual to identify the root causes and implement solutions (see box at left).

"A proactive manager needs to track *all* work problems so that an overlooked one-time anomaly isn't allowed to develop into a 'sudden' destructive work pattern," says Read. For an overworked person, this can seem impossible. Teamwork between manager and group can build an early warning system so they can jointly address issues immediately and develop plans for correction.

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