

MANAGING POOR PERFORMANCE.

Checklist 275

» INTRODUCTION

Poor performance is a commonly cited problem, but it is one which many managers feel ill-equipped to deal with and are often reluctant to tackle. Emotionally, it is not easy to tell someone their performance is not up to scratch and managers may fear adverse reactions or even allegations of harassment and bullying, if they raise problems with individuals.

Managing performance, however, is a key aspect of the manager's role and addressing performance issues should be part of daily good management practice. Managers have a responsibility to enable performance by creating an environment which engages and motivates employees and to support employees in their development. They need to be able to communicate honestly and openly with members of their team and provide feedback and praise on a regular basis.

Ignoring problems or putting off dealing with them until the annual round of performance appraisals, will not resolve the underlying issues and tolerating underperformance will only reinforce it. Failure is demoralising for the individuals concerned as well as those around them. It has far reaching implications, both for the achievement of team and departmental targets and the realisation of the organisation's overarching strategic goals. It's imperative, therefore, for managers to take action without delay as soon as they become aware of failure to meet performance standards. The sooner issues are detected and investigated, the sooner they can be tackled, and the less damage will be caused

Many factors may contribute to poor performance and this checklist provides guidance on identifying problems, diagnosing the underlying issues and taking steps to address them. Particular attention is given to how managers can work with individuals to improve their performance, where the problem relates to their personal abilities, skills and behaviours.

» DEFINITION

Poor performance, or underperformance, is the failure of an employee to fulfil the responsibilities outlined in their job description to the standard required. Underperformance is not just about serious or complete failure but may involve situations where an employee fulfils some parts of their job role well, but fails to perform well in other areas. There are many reasons for poor performance including a lack of capability or motivation on the part of the individual, poor leadership and management on the part of the line manager, or wider organisational and external factors.

» ACTION CHECKLIST

1. Identify problems

As a manager you need to keep an eye on how your own team or department is performing and be aware of problems and issues which are emerging. Common signs of problems include:

- › failure to meet deadlines and targets
- › poor quality output
- › sustained periods of absence (including absence from the work station without a valid reason)
- › repeated lateness
- › unwillingness to follow instructions
- › reluctance to participate in team meetings and discussions
- › evidence of negative attitudes, stress or anxiety
- › instances of unacceptable behaviour.

Make notes of the specific problems that you have highlighted, so that you have evidence in hand when discussing these issues with employees. This will also be vital when formulating plans to address problems later on.

2. Identify the causes

There are many reasons why an employee fails to meet the standards required of them. It may be due to their own abilities, skills and behaviour but additional factors at team, department or organisational level could well be involved. For example:

Poor leadership and management

If you are the individual's line manager, you need to consider whether deficits in your own management and leadership skills and behaviour have contributed to the individual's poor performance. Ask yourself:

- › Have clear objectives been set and understood?
- › Does the employee have a clear idea of what is expected of them, in terms of performance and standards of behaviour?
- › Does the employee understand how their work contributes to departmental and organisational goals?
- › Are they receiving any conflicting messages about their work or their role?
- › Has the employee received adequate induction into their job responsibilities?
- › Have they received training and development for all parts of their role?
- › Are they able to access suitable support and guidance when necessary?

Wider organisational factors

The individual's performance may also be affected by the way work is allocated, managed and recognised across the organisation. Ask yourself:

- › Are departmental or individual workloads excessive?
- › Does the individual have the resources and equipment they need to perform well?
- › Is the work environment conducive to the production of high quality output?
- › Is the employee given opportunities to contribute to the best of their ability?
- › Is the employee feeling undervalued, ignored or overlooked for promotion?
- › Are there any relationship difficulties or conflicts within the team?
- › Is the employee being bullied?

External pressures

Bear in mind that external factors may also be affecting the employee's ability to perform well in their work. They may be distracted by financial pressures, subject to either short-term or ongoing health problems or worried about difficulties in home and family life, such as caring responsibilities or relationship breakdown. This is particularly likely to be the case if you have noticed a sudden or marked deterioration in performance. Be prepared to handle any issues of this nature with sensitivity.

3. Discuss the matter with the employee concerned

Whatever your view of the causes of problems, it is vital to discuss the issue with the employee concerned and get their perspective on it. When deciding how to raise your concerns with the employee it's important to consider two primary factors:

- › The problem – How severe or complex is it? What impact has it had on the individual, team, organisation? How long has it been going on? Are they performing poorly in a specific area of their work or across all areas of responsibility?
- › The employee - how long has the employee worked for the organisation? Do they have a previously unblemished work record or a history of unsatisfactory performance? Are they new to the organisation?

or to their role? How good is your relationship with them? Are they likely to confide in you or be defensive and secretive?

If the matter is fairly minor and you have a close working relationship, then an informal chat may be all that is required. Alternatively, you may prefer to raise it as part of a regular 1:1 session. Be mindful that issues need to be addressed promptly so don't wait several months for the next appraisal before instigating an initial conversation.

4. Give the employee a chance to speak

The purpose of this initial meeting is to explore the issue and reach a common understanding about its nature and causes. It isn't about confronting an employee or pointing a finger of blame. Present the specific evidence you compiled earlier so that the employee knows exactly what is giving you cause for concern and give them ample opportunity to explain how they see the situation. Pay close attention to what they have to say - you may discover issues of which you were completely unaware, relating either to work or home circumstances. Encourage them to talk candidly, and ask open and probing questions to clarify their response if necessary. Be prepared to handle any defensive or emotional responses calmly and objectively and avoid being judgemental or critical. Enabling the employee to voice their views will help them to feel more empowered and less vulnerable and will lay the foundation for a collaborative approach to finding a solution.

5. Decide on the action required

You may find that your initial assessment of the situation was correct, or your eyes may have been opened to other factors of which you were not aware. You now need to adopt a problem solving approach and work with the employee to reach agreement on the best way forward.

Some issues will be easier to address than others. For example, if a lack of guidance and support has been identified as a factor, you need to decide how you will provide this, through coaching sessions perhaps; if their workload is shown to be excessive, you will need to look at whether it is feasible to reallocate work to other team members; if additional training is required, you will need to make arrangements for this to be undertaken; if a lack of up to date equipment is identified, you may need to apply for an increase to the departmental budget.

Where the performance shortfall relates to the employee's own abilities and behaviour it is important to involve them in coming up with their own suggestions for workable solutions and in taking responsibility for their own performance. Assess what motivates them and find suitable incentives which will stimulate them and give them something specific to work towards.

In the case of factors which are beyond the employee's control, consider what could be done to alleviate the situation and what support could be provided. Be aware that if poor performance is due to disability, such as hearing problems or learning difficulties, employers are required to make 'reasonable adjustments' to enable the employee to perform their work in a satisfactory manner. In such cases, you may need to consult with colleagues across the organisation, including specialised HR personnel.

6. Draw up a plan of action

This will detail clearly what actions are to be taken to address the problem, jointly, by the manager and by the individual. The level of detail will depend upon the seriousness of the issue and/or how easy it is to resolve. For example, an employee who is constantly late because of public transport issues may simply endeavour to leave home earlier or seek an alternative means of getting to work. Conversely, if several different problems have been identified, the causes and solutions may well differ, so you will need to set out separate action points to address them. Where the employee needs to work at improving their performance, draw up a development plan which states clearly what is expected of them.

Set SMART objectives so both parties can clearly see what the goals are, how they will be met and how they will be measured. Explain and reinforce every decision made, so that the employee is left in no doubt as to what is expected of them. It's important to set realistic timescales for actions to be carried out and improvements achieved. These will depend on the nature of the problem, and the measures to be taken to resolve it – if a programme of mentoring or training are to be undertaken, a period of months rather than weeks may be involved.

7. Keep the employee informed

Keep the employee up to date with the outcomes of any actions you have agreed to carry out yourself. If a performance development plan has been put in place, make sure that the employee is clear about the steps to be taken should their performance fail to improve. Refer them to the organisation's policy for dealing with poor performance, so they can see that you are following a logical step-by-step process in a fair and correct manner.

Always keep in mind that your aim is to help the employee to improve their performance. They should not feel threatened or coerced, but at the same time, they must be fully aware of the implications of failing to achieve the agreed targets, so that nothing takes them unawares at a later stage. Try to find the right balance between the carrot – incentives which will help to motivate and the stick – measures that hold the employee accountable for their performance.

8. Monitor and review progress

You may have set a date to review progress, but it's also important to monitor progress on an ongoing basis. If it very soon becomes obvious that an agreed course of action isn't working as intended, discuss this with the employee and agree to take another approach. You may need to try a number of different approaches before finding a workable solution. Seek feedback from colleagues such as trainers or mentors so that you can check progress on an informal basis.

Once the time set to review progress is reached, arrange another informal meeting with the employee to discuss how things are going and to compare how they think they've done, with your view of the situation. Where performance is still under par but improvements have been made, discuss how to build on success so far and provide any further guidance you feel is needed. Arrange to meet again at a future date to discuss any remaining weaknesses and continue to review and monitor progress, until you are happy that the issues have been satisfactorily resolved.

9. Give praise and positive feedback when merited

When improvements are noted albeit small ones, acknowledge this and give positive feedback to encourage the employee and motivate them to continue on the same track. No one likes to admit or be told that they are not performing as expected and this can in itself undermine confidence and affect performance. Recognise that it can take time for an individual to regain confidence after a setback, so do all you can to help them rebuild their self-esteem and appreciate that they are a valued member of the team.

10. Decide whether further action is required

In instances where no improvements have been achieved, you will need to decide on the next steps to take. Your goal at all times should be to enable the employee to continue working for the organisation rather than to dismiss them.

Alternative options such as re-assignment to another department or a different job role or reallocation of job responsibilities can also be considered. If you feel that the problem is the result of an ill-advised appointment or promotion, a position which carries less responsibility could make all the difference. However, if you decide to go down this route keep in mind that any changes to employment contracts must be drawn up and agreed with the employee.

If personal issues are affecting an employee, an agreed period of absence, a change in working hours or a change of working environment could be the answer. In the case of medical issues, ask to see evidence such as a doctor's note and consider their professional advice as to the best way forward.

11. Understand when formal disciplinary or dismissal proceedings are appropriate

Lack of capacity can be a potentially fair reason for dismissal under UK employment legislation but this should be considered a last resort. If for any reason you feel that dismissal on grounds of capacity is unavoidable, you must be able to show that the issues have been fully investigated, that the employee has been given the chance to explain their performance, that all avenues for improvement have been explored and that options for alternative employment have been considered, where possible. You must also follow a fair procedure for dismissal so be sure to consult relevant legislation and organisational policies and procedures before initiating any action of this type.

Disciplinary action can be taken when poor performance is due to negligence on the part of the employee, or where a performance improvement plan has failed to result in the desired improvements - for example, if the employee is unwilling and/or fails to take proposed actions to resolve the issues. Again, you must ensure that the employee has been given *every* opportunity to improve, with your support and you must adhere strictly to your organisation's disciplinary policy and procedures to ensure that all actions taken are fair and legal, and that the employee is kept well informed at every step in the process.



POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Managers should avoid:

- › failing to address problems promptly
- › not listening to the employee's side of the story
- › being confrontational and judgemental
- › setting unrealistic objectives
- › placing the blame on the individual rather than exploring all the factors involved.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

Managing teams in a week, Nigel Cumberland

London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2013 (See especially, Thursday: managing poor performers in your team.

This book is available as an [e-book](#)

Performance management: theory and practice, Sue Hutchinson

London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2013

Management: a practical guide, Alison Price and David Price

London: Icon Books, 2012

How to be an even better manager: a complete A to Z of proven techniques and essential skills, 7th ed, Michael Armstrong

London: Kogan Page, 2008 (See Chapter 33 How to manage under-performers)

A hard copy of the 8th edition, 2011 of this book is also available.

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from CMI's library. More information at:

www.managers.org.uk/library

JOURNAL ARTICLES

L&D isn't always the answer, Clinton Wingrove

Training Journal, August 2012, pp 57-60

More stick, less carrot, Alison Coleman

Director, Sep 2008, pp 37, 39-40

Tough love do you have the heart?, Johann Tasker

Personnel Today, 14 February 2006, pp 24-28

These articles are available for members to download from CMI's library. More information at

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RELATED CHECKLISTS

- 102** Setting up a disciplinary procedure
- 109** Undertaking a disciplinary interview
- 221** Motivating the de-motivated

INTERNET RESOURCES

A **guide to Managing Poor Performance** focusing on the legal implications is available to CMI members from the BusinessHR service on the CMI website at www.managers.org.uk/BusinessHR

ACAS How to manage performance <http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=2927>
Advisory booklet including a section on managing poor performance.

ACAS Dismissing Employees <http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1797>
Information on the ACAS Code of Practice on Discipline and Grievance and on fair and unfair dismissal.



NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MANAGEMENT & LEADERSHIP

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

- Unit DC5 Help individuals address problems affecting their performance
- Unit DC2 Support individuals learning and development



MORE INFORMATION

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Revised June 2015