

The key to unlocking your potential

Summary Points

- Employee underperformance ranks as one of the top ten concerns of managers
- An estimated 20 per cent of employees work below capacity
- Many managers are uncomfortable dealing with performance issues, engaging a cycle of strategic avoidance
- Understanding underperformance issues
- The value of clear communication strategies

One of the most difficult, if not confronting, issues for managers is how to ensure the consistent development of underperforming staff in order to improve their motivation levels and thereby increase their individual productivity.

It is no surprise that it ranks as one of the top ten concerns of both public and private sector managers. Across both sectors there is a widespread understanding of impact staff skill and motivation levels may have on general morale, productivity and business profitability.

Current research indicates that approximately 20 per cent of employees may be considered as working below their real capacity.

This may be as a result of motivational problems, poorly selected continuous professional development, or temporary personal difficulties. Whatever the reason, many managers feels distinctly uncomfortable with addressing the issue of staff underperformance despite their understanding of the impact it may have on general morale, client and customer relationships and business performance.

For some, the answer is a 'tough love' approach, based on a paternalistic, if not punitive, method of managing such issues. The difficulty of such an approach is that it tends to be devoid of any sensitivity and can easily become unnecessarily confrontational. This may not only present a potential personal and legal minefield but it can also contribute to

the strategic avoidance of addressing staff underperformance issues by managers because they do not feel equipped to manage such confrontation.

In short, 'tough love', although it sounds like a tempting and easy solution, may simply compound the problem.

Understanding underperformance issues

One of often undiagnosed and intrinsic problems in this issue is the failure to recognise that managing staff performance is a process, not an event: it is not the same as conducting an appraisal. The successful management of staff performance entails the establishing and regular monitoring of the required standards that must be met by staff.

In general, performance and appraisal systems are not effective in motivating staff and do not ensure consistently high levels of performance. This means that it is managers who must address the daily issues of motivating their staff and taking appropriate action, when necessary, to raise their performance.

Typically, managers are hampered by the combined lack of a practical knowledge and training and a lack of courage in dealing with staff performance issues. This pattern of strategic avoidance can continue despite the knowledge of how staff underperformance may affect staff morale, customer relationships and general productivity levels.

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Thus some managers will allow staff performance problems to continue for considerable periods of time before they intervene.

The problem then is that the situation may have become critical by the time of any intervention and that poorly considered decisions are implemented.

This awkward nexus of strategic avoidance and underperformance can be systematically resolved by providing managers with the skills required to diagnose and then address issues of staff underperformance.

Communicating clearly

One of the most significant steps is for managers to indicate in highly specific terms what their expectations of staff are and in such a way that makes those expectations clearly consonant with the values of the organisation.

If employees are not clearly told what expectations are held in relation to their performance, they can hardly be responsible for underperforming.

In articulating these organisational expectations, it must be made equally clear that they are not negotiable, that they are values and standards about which the organisation is passionate and to which it is committed.

It may be that, on some occasions, an employee's own values may not be consistent with those of the organisation. In other words, there may be a poor culture fit. It is important to remember that in such instances this is not about making a moral judgement; it is about understanding that the employee may be better suited to another environment and be happier working with an alternative employer. In these

circumstances, managers require both the skills and the confidence to deal with the situation fairly and directly while supporting the employee in the search for suitable employment elsewhere.

Using self-reflection and emotional intelligence

In resolving issues of underperformance, there are two implied levels of self-reflection involved. While the most obvious is to encourage the employee to engage in self-reflection in order to identify blocks in motivation or performance, a parallel and equally important process of self-reflection must be undertaken by the employee's manager.

The manager's process of self-reflection needs to occur prior to any meeting with the staff member. This will provide the manager with the opportunity to assess how well he or she is managing the employee and how the manager's own behaviours and interactions with the employee may contribute to, or frustrate, arriving at a mutually acceptable solution.

In essence, the manager needs to ask himself or herself three very simple, yet profoundly revealing, questions in terms of his or her management of the employee concerned. That is, what should the manager be doing more of, or be doing less of, or be doing the same of in managing the employee's motivation and performance levels?

These three questions are important for the both the manager and employee to reflect upon because they hold the real answers in terms of providing the necessary support, motivation and assistance to help employees perform at their optimum levels of capability.

Not only must the manager be clear about what he or she regards as being intrinsic to the performance issue, but it is equally important that the manager have several options available to assist the employee. These may include a continuous professional development model, specific training, or a process of coaching or mentoring.

To make the most appropriate choices requires both parties to have reflected on their roles in the performance issue and to have positive contributions to bring to any discussion and resolution of the matter.

Therefore, it is important that the role of emotional intelligence is not overlooked, or taken for granted, in generating the looked-for resolution.

The manager must display empathy and understanding and be in a position to offer assistance to the employee in a genuinely supportive manner.

To this end, the manager needs to understand and truly appreciate that emotions are the norm rather than the exception and that any emotional response of the employee's must be managed in a sympathetic and constructive way if a resolution of the problem is to be achieved.

It is most important that the manager avoids creating any impression in the mind of the employee that the manager thinks the issue of underperformance is the employee's problem and that it is, therefore, the responsibility of the employee to sort it out.

This kind of failure to address the emotional issues of underperformance can potentially derail any discussion and become a

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source of grievance rather than resolution.

A suggested strategy

If the underperformance issue is not connected to a poor culture fit, the process outlined below can provide a helpful strategy for raising the matter of an employee's underperformance.

As with any such conversation, it is important that the employee's right to privacy and confidentiality is upheld. Avoid holding this sort of discussion in a public area or within earshot of the employee's colleagues and peers.

1. Raise only one issue at a time. Resist the urge to deal with every aspect of the problem at once as this will only confuse the discussion and make the employee feel he or she is the subject of a personal attack.
2. In stating the issue, restrict yourself to 10-15 words. Do not use judgemental or emotive language. State the problem clearly, succinctly and without allocating blame.
3. Rephrase the issue as a question and ask for the employee's response. This will create a dialogue between you and help to engage the employee in developing a solution in partnership with you.
4. Ascertain whether the other person agrees or disagrees with your position. Remain consistent in your presentation of the subject for discussion.
5. Offer the employee an incentive for improving his or

her performance. This may be in terms of a future bonus review, career prospects or professional development opportunities.

6. If there are feelings and responses that are hindering the mutual exploration and evaluation of potential solutions, deal with them first. This is an important step in being perceived to offer genuine support and assistance to the employee.
7. Ask the employee for his or her suggestions for resolving the issue. This will encourage a greater degree of personal commitment to providing a solution. Avoid prematurely selecting solutions, thereby blocking any better alternatives that may arise.
8. Offer appropriate encouragement, advice and practical support. Suggest ways in which you, as manager, can help the employee to achieve an appropriate resolution of the issue.
9. Agree on a plan of action and agree on dates for progress reviews and further discussions.
10. Clearly allocate time to follow up on each of the agreed steps.

Just as the manager has used the formula of more of, less of and same of as a basis for his or her self-reflection in preparation for the interview, it is helpful if the discussion is initiated in this style.

Open the discussion in a positive way. For instance:

- tell the employee what behaviours the manager would like to see more of;
- follow up with what behaviours the manager would like to see the employee do less of;
- conclude with what behaviours the manager would like to see the employee do the same of.

This can help to provide a less confrontational means of discussing underperformance issues. It also offers a useful format for developing a course of action that can be discussed and agreed upon in a more objective manner.

It also enables the employee to hear objective statements being made of his or her current strengths and weaknesses in relation to the underperformance issue.

Finally, to assist both employees and managers, it is important to provide training in communication, listening and negotiating skills. This will help to provide managers with the confidence to practice and utilise the necessary skills to work with employees to motivate them and address underperformance issues as they arise.

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