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Dealing With Poor Performance



By the
Mind Tools
Editorial Team

Lack of Ability, or Low Motivation?

For every hundred men hacking away at the branches of a diseased tree, only one will stoop to inspect the roots.

– Chinese proverb.

Are individual members of your team performing less well than you'd hoped? If so, this proverb can take on great significance. To figure out what's causing the performance issue, you have to get to the root of the problem.

But because employee performance affects organizational performance, we tend to want to look for a quick fix. Would a training course help Ted? Or should you move him into a different role?

These types of solutions focus largely on the ability of the person performing the job. Performance, though, is a function of both ability and motivation.

$$\text{Performance} = \text{Ability} \times \text{Motivation}$$

From "Developing Management Skills" (8th Edition) p.27, by David A. Whetten and Kim S. Cameron. © 2011. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc. Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Where:

- **Ability** is the person's aptitude, as well as the training and resources supplied by the organization.
- **Motivation** is the product of desire and commitment.

Someone with 100 percent motivation and 75 performance ability can often achieve above-average performance. But a worker with only 25 percent ability won't be able to achieve the type of performance you expect, regardless of his or her level of motivation.

Tip:

This is why **recruitment** and job matching are such critical parts of performance management. Be sure to assess ability properly during the selection process. Minor deficiencies can certainly be improved through training – however, most organizations don't have the time or resources needed to remedy significant gaps.

Diagnosing Poor Performance

So, before you can fix poor performance, you have to understand its cause. Does it come from lack of ability or low motivation?

Incorrect diagnoses can lead to lots of problems later on. If you believe an employee is not making enough of an effort, you'll likely put increased pressure on him or her to perform. But if the real issue is ability, then increased pressure may only make the problem worse.

Low ability may be associated with the following:

- Over-difficult tasks.
- Low individual aptitude, skill, and knowledge.
- Evidence of strong effort, despite poor performance.
- Lack of improvement over time.

People with low ability may have been poorly matched with jobs in the first place. They may have been promoted to a position that's too demanding for them. Or maybe they no longer have the support that previously helped them to perform well.

Enhancing Ability

There are five main ways to overcome performance problems associated with a lack of ability. Consider using them in this sequence, which starts with the least intrusive:

1. Resupply.

2. Retrain.
3. Refit.
4. Reassign.
5. Release.

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Be sure to address each of these interventions in one-on-one performance interviews with employees.

1. Resupply

Focus on the **resources** provided to do the job. Do employees have what they need to perform well and meet expectations?

- Ask them about additional resources they think they need.
- Listen for points of frustration.
- Note where employees report that support is inadequate.
- Verify the claims with your own investigation. People will often blame external sources for their poor performance before admitting their own fault.

This is a very effective first step in addressing performance. It signals to members of your team that you're interested in their perspective and are willing to make the required changes.

2. Retrain

Provide additional **training** to team members. Explore with them whether they have the actual skills required to do what's expected. Given the pace of change of technology, it's easy for people's skills to become outdated.

This option recognizes the need to retain employees and keep their skills current. There are various types of retraining you can provide:

- Training seminars with in-house or external providers.

- Computer-based training (CBT).
- Simulation exercises.
- Subsidized college or university courses.

Resupplying and retraining will often cure poor performance. People and organizations may get into ruts, and fail to recognize these issues until poor performance finally highlights them.

3. Refit

When these first two measures aren't sufficient, consider refitting the job to the person. Are there parts of the job that can be reassigned?

Analyze the individual components of the work, and try out different combinations of tasks and abilities. This may involve rearranging the jobs of other people as well. Your goal is to retain the employee, meet operational needs, and provide meaningful and rewarding work to everyone involved. (For more detail on this, see our article on [Job Enrichment](#) 🌱.)

4. Reassign

When revising or refitting the job doesn't turn the situation around, look at reassigning the poor performer. Typical job reassignments may decrease the demands of the role by reducing the need for the following:

- Responsibility.
- Technical knowledge.
- Interpersonal skills.

If you use this option, make sure that the reassigned job is still challenging and stimulating. To ensure that this strategy is successful, never use demotion as a punishment tactic within your organization. Remember, the employee's performance is not intentionally poor – he or she simply lacked the skills for the position.

5. Release

As a final option for lack of ability, you may need to [let the employee go](#) 🌱. Sometimes there are no opportunities for reassignment, and refitting isn't appropriate for the organization. In these cases, the best solution for everyone involved is for the employee to find other work. You may need to consider contractual terms and restrictions; however, in

the long run, this may be the best decision for your whole team.

Remember, there are potential negative consequences of retaining a poor performer after you've exhausted all the options available:

- You'll annoy other members of your team, who may have to work harder to "carry" the poor performer.
- You may promote a belief in others that you're prepared to accept mediocrity – or, worse, underperformance.
- You may waste precious time and resources that could be better used elsewhere.
- You may signal that some employees deserve preferential treatment.
- You may undermine the whole idea of finding the best person for the job.

Improving Motivation

Sometimes poor performance has its roots in low motivation. When this is the case, you need to work closely with the employee to **create a motivating environment** ⁺ in which to work. There are three key interventions that may improve people's motivation:

1. Setting of performance goals.
2. Provision of performance assistance.
3. Provision of performance feedback.

1. Performance Goals

Goal setting is a well-recognized aspect of performance improvement. Employees must understand what's expected of them and agree on what they need to do to improve. For a detailed explanation of the goal setting process, see our articles on **Goal Setting** ⁺, **Golden Rules of Goal Setting** ⁺ and **Locke's Goal Setting Theory** ⁺.

2. Performance Assistance

Once you've set appropriate goals, help your team member succeed by doing the following:

- Regularly assessing the employee's ability, and take action if it's deficient.
- Providing the necessary training.
- Securing the resources needed.
- Encouraging cooperation and assistance from coworkers.

Tip:

Consider using the **GROW Model** as a way of coaching employees to improve their performance.

3. Performance Feedback

People need **feedback** on their efforts. They have to know where they stand in terms of current performance and long-term expectations. When providing feedback, keep in mind the importance of the following:

- **Timeliness** – Provide feedback as soon as possible. This links the behavior with the evaluation.
- **Openness and Honesty** – Make sure that the feedback is accurate. Avoid mixed messages or talking about the person rather than the performance. That said, provide both positive and negative feedback so that employees can begin to truly understand their strengths and weaknesses.
- **Personalized Rewards** – A large part of feedback involves rewards and recognition. Make sure that your company has a system that acknowledges the successes of employees.

Supporting this, ensure that you meet regularly with the employee, so that you can review progress and provide regular feedback.

Creating a Performance Improvement Plan

So how do you do this in practice? This is where you need to develop a performance improvement plan. Armed with the strategies we've looked at, you first need to evaluate the performance issue that you're facing:

- Have you discussed with the person what he or she feels the problem is?
- Have you evaluated your organization's motivation system? Are you doing everything you can to recognize and reward people's contributions?
- Are you rewarding the things that you actually want done?
- Do you have regular goal setting and development meetings with members of your team?
- Do you help your people keep their skills current?

From there, it's important that you and the employee discuss and agree upon a plan for improving performance. Write down what you've agreed, along with dates by which goals should be achieved. Then monitor progress with the team member, and use the techniques we've discussed above for increasing motivation and dealing with ability-related issues.

Recognize that the actions needed to close ability gaps need high motivation on the employee's part to be successful. The two causes of poor performance – lack of ability and low motivation – are inextricably intertwined, and goal setting, feedback, and a supportive work environment are necessary conditions for improving both.

Key Points

You need to understand the root of a performance problem before you can fully address it. Ability and motivation go together to impact performance, and the most successful performance improvement efforts combine strategies for improving each. This creates a positive environment where people feel supported to reach their performance potential; and feel valued, knowing that the organization wants to find a good fit for their abilities.

At times, your interventions may not be enough to salvage the situation. As long as you've given performance enhancement your best effort, and you've reasonably exhausted all your options, then you can feel confident that you're making the right decision if you do need to let someone go.

Before going down that route, however, try the strategies discussed here and create a great work environment for your employees – one where their abilities are used to their full potential, and where good motivational techniques are used on a regular basis.

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