

# Resolving Performance Issues

## *Addressing Problems before they Get Worse*

By Jennifer Forgie

**W**e all know that firing someone can be a risky proposition in today's sue-happy society. As a result, it's much better to help "below standard" employees improve before you get to that point.

We usually can spot a poor performer at work. Maybe it's the salesperson with inconsistent numbers (dynamite one month, sluggish the next), the assistant manager who's out with a "headache" every other (non-payday) Friday, or the receptionist who gets along well with co-workers, but who is sometimes surly with customers. Here's the point: these people *aren't* terrible employees; they're just not doing what they should be doing. You're not ready to fire them – not yet, anyway – but if you don't do *something*, their performance issues are sure to escalate until they become full-blown problem employees.

This is a problem that many business leaders face. They are hesitant to deal with performance issues, so they send indirect messages and subtle signals, or they simply avoid the situation, hoping it will go away. As a result, the organization's top performers – and whose behavior is consistent with company values – become increasingly resentful of co-workers who appear to be getting away with bad behavior or not doing their fair share of the work.

Ultimately, the leader's reluctance to deal with the subpar employee leads to another problem: When it gets to the point that the person's performance or behavior can no longer be tolerated, and the poor performer is told that he/she must improve, it often comes as a shock because this is the first time that this individual is aware that there is a problem.

Consider the *Business Week* article, "Fear of Firing" (by Michael Orey), which painted a grim picture of corporate leaders held hostage by poor-performing employees who are more than happy to "play the litigation card." Even if termination is justified, few employers want to run the risk of being taken to court by a disgruntled ex-employee. Clearly, it's better to intervene with "pre-problem" employees before they reach the point of no return.

### **Performance Management**

One reason why more managers don't deal with performance issues is because they don't think of performance management as a tool to help run the business and address performance issues. This is an extremely pervasive problem. A survey by OnPoint Consulting involving 115 HR professionals and 441 managers found that more than half of the respondents have a negative view of their companies' performance management systems.

OnPoint's survey also found that less than half of respondents believe their rating scales enable managers to accurately differentiate levels of performance. It's not unusual for a manager to check a "meets expectations" each year, even if an employee actually *isn't* meeting them! Since the paper trail doesn't reflect any problems – it suddenly becomes very difficult to confront someone about behavior that he or she has *gotten away with* for a long time!

So, what *can* be done to keep substandard performance from snowballing out of control? The first step to keep substandard performance from snowballing out of control is for the organization to examine its performance management system and determine whether it's working.

**(Editor's note:** One approach is for supervisors to complete an assessment referral form about the employee, and work with the EAP on

improving the behavior and/or performance. However, as the author states, *discretion* must be used to keep such forms from becoming an excuse to not confronting bad behavior or performance.)

The following are some additional tips to help boost the performance of substandard employees:

❖ **Paint a clear picture of what “good” performance looks like. Fill in all the brush strokes.** In order to be able to pinpoint poor performance, management must be clear about what high performance looks like, and translate that into specific behaviors and outcomes. Then, share those behaviors and outcomes with employees.

It’s not enough to simply say, “*Joe, you need to be more proactive.*” What does that really mean? Perhaps Joe isn’t taking the initiative to share information with team members, or he isn’t anticipating problems that may impact his project plans, or he isn’t informing clients of key decisions – or maybe it’s all of the above. But until you can articulate specific behaviors and outcomes, it’s very difficult to communicate when standards are – or aren’t – being met.

❖ **Communicate expectations in plain English. Employees must understand what’s expected of them.** It’s not fair to hit them with corrective feedback or a bad job review if expectations aren’t clear.

Performance expectations should be set not only for specific responsibilities that need to be accomplished, but also for the workplace behaviors that employees are expected to use in interactions with co-workers, customers, etc. Clear and agreed-upon expectations provide a solid foundation upon which to provide recognition and reinforcement as well as guidance and corrective feedback.

❖ **Don’t let an employee’s expertise or revenue production translate into a “get-out-of-trouble-free card.”** Sylvia isn’t necessarily doing a good job just because she

brought in a big account, or she does a great job updating the company website. If she’s rude, arrogant, or condescending with co-workers, make no mistake – she is slowly poisoning your culture. Is the money she’s bringing in worth the disruption and resentment her behavior is causing among her co-workers? Probably not.

The biggest challenge for leaders is to take corrective action with an employee that is a top producer, but whose behavior is not consistent with company values. However, if these values are to have any real meaning, then *how* something gets done must be considered just as important as *what* gets done.

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❖ **Don’t delay. Raise performance concerns while they’re fresh.** There’s no doubt that most people hate confrontation. It can be awkward and difficult, but it must be done – it’s the only way to prevent performance issues from becoming a problem employee. However, these conversations become easier when goals and expectations have been clearly described. Discussions don’t have to get ugly if the focus is on agreed-upon behaviors and performance targets.

As mentioned, it is tempting for managers to avoid confrontation and simply check off boxes in performance review forms. Such managers



run the risk of losing the respect of subordinates. OnPoint's survey found that 46% of respondents believe that *"managers give more time and attention to filling out review forms than they do planning meetings and discussions with their employees."* Helping Jane understand that she needs to be prepared and on time to meetings is more important for behavioral change and performance improvement than telling her that she is, for example, rated a "2" on a five-point scale.

❖ **Provide ongoing coaching and feedback, both scheduled and "on the spot."** Behavioral change is much more successful when efforts are regularly reinforced. This means providing individual feedback (both positive and constructive) to employees about their progress on goals not just once a year at an annual performance review, but periodically through both scheduled individual meetings and on-the-spot chats. Leaders should stay on top of this strategy, even if the performance management system doesn't require it.

Given the importance of regular feedback and coaching, OnPoint was surprised to discover that nearly half (42%) of respondents reported that periodic reviews are *not* a formal part of their performance management system. And in those companies where periodic meetings are *not* a formal part of the system, less than half (43%) gave their managers positive ratings. This compared to a 71% positive rating when periodic performance reviews *are* required.

❖ **Recognize the small victories.** Another key in turning around performance problems is to be sure to recognize *progress* toward improvement. Too often, managers reserve recognition for their top performers or "save it up" until poor performers get up to speed.

While it's important to recognize high performers, it's just as important to recognize *all* positive behavior, especially when it's a step in the right direction for an employee with a performance issue. This helps build momentum

and confidence, and it reinforces the behaviors that are needed for this person to turn around. (**Editor's note:** See the "Celebrate Success!" handout on page 4.)

❖ **Goal setting and coaching don't just magically happen. Make sure managers are trained for competence in these skills.** Without fundamental skills, *no* performance management system – *no* rating scale, *no* technology, and *no* form – can turn performance problems around. Of the companies in OnPoint's study, only 53% provide managers with the training necessary to provide positive and constructive coaching and feedback.

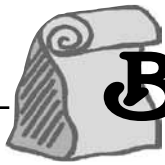
Manager training is often the missing link in a company's quest to correct performance issues. It's easy for someone in upper management to say, *"Make everyone on your team an 'A' player!"* But if managers aren't taught the relevant skills, it's just not a realistic request. It's far less painful to properly train managers than it is to let pre-problem employees fester into full-blown "culture poisoners."

## Summary

Dealing with pre-problem employees in a deliberate, structured way can stop their downward spiral. But even if it doesn't, at least you will have a paper trail that enables you to support your rationale for letting them go and minimize worries about legal retaliation.

Potential litigation is a scary reality that keeps many substandard employees on payroll long after serious damage has been done to morale. What OnPoint is saying is that adopting and actually *using* a good performance management system is a much better solution. Think of it as preventive medicine that keeps your organization strong and healthy. It's the right thing to do – and with the support of HR and the EAP – it doesn't have to be difficult. ■

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## Celebrate Success!

❖ **Make a sincere effort.** Praise needs to be genuine to be effective. Be thoughtful in your compliments or they will lose their meaning. Put other way; don't compliment everyone on every little thing, especially routine tasks that should automatically be done well.

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❖ **Think outside the bucks.** While money is a powerful motivator, it's not the only way to acknowledge extra effort. Other options include sending a hand-written thank-you note; holding an impromptu, company-paid lunch or other get-together; mentioning an improving performer in a company newsletter or staff meeting; or giving the employee an afternoon off. Things like this might seem small, but they go a long way toward saying thanks and encouraging further success.

❖ **Don't be afraid to be subjective.** Too many managers are so afraid of being sued by non-performers that they

go overboard in being objective. As a result, they unfairly level the playing field; treating poor performers as if they're doing ok, while penalizing the top players. Stop! REWARD star employees so the underperformers understand exactly what they're missing out on, and what they have to do to measure up.

❖ **Reward the right behavior.** The most effective incentive programs are tied to actions that are most important to the business, such as solving problems or providing superior customer service. In this way, management is improving the performance of the entire organization, as well as the individual employee. ■

*Source: The Creative Group (www.creativegroup.com).*

