

5 Tips for Managing an Underperformer — Remotely

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While a majority of employers believe that their employees will return to their workplaces after Covid-19's impact diminishes, working from home isn't going to disappear. The reality is that a huge number of people were already working from home (almost 10 million workers in the U.S. in 2019); that number is only likely to rise post-pandemic. As the manager of a remote team, you can't afford to ignore underperformance from remote workers, whether they're temporarily at home, working in local branch offices, or half a world away.

Although you might assume that managing an underperformer in a remote environment would be more challenging (who wants to have a series of difficult conversations over Zoom?), there's actually an upside. You may actually be *more* effective in handling the situation because you have to plan and structure your interactions, rather than catching up in the hallway or waiting for them to stop by when you're in the office. Here are five things you can do to help remote underperformers improve their game.

Revisit your expectations. Take the opportunity to reconsider what you want most from the employee, and why you feel you're not getting it. Start by reviewing your recent directives, and whether your communications about what's expected have been clear and consistent from the beginning. This is something you do with underperformers in any context, but when you don't see the employee in person, it's even more important to ask yourself whether your statements have

been ambiguous. Part of this process is separating out whether your dissatisfaction is with their work products, or with the way they deliver.

If their style or approach is the problem, check to see if you're expecting them to work the way you do. If that's the case, let go of those expectations and dispassionately assess their real strengths and capacities for contributing to the team's work. When one of the senior executives I work with came to terms with the fact that he didn't care for one of his subordinates, it turned out that the remote relationship worked better because he could pay more attention to her output and the praise he heard about her from other leaders, and less to his own biased reactions.

If you suspect the underperformer's difficulties come from insufficient experience, specific skill deficits, or a lack of business or organizational acumen, consider whether they need training, or to partner with a more experienced colleague. This may be more challenging in a remote environment, but it's too risky to wait until you're back in the office to provide the support they need.

Learn more about them. Even if they've been on your team for a while, it's important to ask about their goals and what they care about, as these things change as circumstances evolve. Plus, you don't have the benefit of casual, in-person contact to pick up details about family, hobbies, or past work successes. Then, modify your management approach to match their needs. For example, you might learn that they miss working side-by-side with colleagues and would perform better if they were assigned to projects that involved more regular interaction.

If you're not familiar with their remote set-up and schedule, ask. Some team members may prefer strict deadlines to structure their often-interrupted workdays; others may benefit from more flexible deadlines than usual to help them deal with the additional pressures of working from home. Take their home obligations like schooling time or elder care into account, according them the same respect you would regular work meetings.

Level with them and be specific. You may not be in the same room, but providing feedback is still a requirement. Many people who aren't doing well have a vague feeling that something is wrong, but don't really know which of their behaviors aren't working. For example, telling a team leader that they need to "be a better listener" doesn't help them understand specifically what they need to do differently. It's much more helpful to explain that when they turn away during video conferences or change the subject while team members are speaking, the team loses trust and confidence in them. The feedback gives them the opportunity to actively practice modifying those behaviors.

Help them learn how to improve their own performance. As much as possible, use questions to encourage them to self-diagnose and to project into their own future: "How will this experience set you up to do better in the future?" I often ask coaching clients "Why do you think I'm asking you this?" to encourage them to reach their own conclusions, rather than telling them what I have observed, which doesn't trigger the same kind of "aha" that self-discovery does. This will help you avoid micromanaging, which is a significant temptation when you're trying to be extremely clear about expectations.

Stay in close enough contact. Keep in mind that a remote underperformer can't just drop in to check on things or "take your temperature." It's on you as their manager to stay in regular touch and to keep them in the loop. Don't assume that no news is good news. After you've given an employee candid feedback and they don't hear from you, they can start to worry that you're ignoring them because you've written them off, and their performance can deteriorate further. Schedule regular meetings to talk about their progress. When a VP learned that one of her reports thought she was "ghosting" him, we came up with a consistent schedule of one full update and two quick touch-bases each week for a few months until the relationship was on a stronger footing.

If you've asked them to keep you up to date on their progress, make clear how you want them to do that. If they tend to use email, but you're awash in email and respond better to texts or Slack messages, tell them that. And don't rely only on video meetings, where the lack of true eye contact can make it seem like you're getting nonverbal clues when you're not. If you're concerned that you're not getting a good read on your team member's state of mind, plan to have at least some of your interactions by phone and listen carefully. The tone of their voice may give you more clues about what needs intervention.

It's not easy to work with a remote employee who isn't performing well, particularly when you can't sit down together and have a conversation. But using specific, road-tested techniques to help them improve will strengthen not only their performance, but their relationship with you as well.