

How to Properly Deal with a Poor Performer

HPPY | Editor's Choice | June 13, 2025

Employees are expected to do the tasks as described in their job descriptions. After all, doing so is the bare minimum for securing their positions in the organizations they're serving. Employers are also required to provide support and interventions that can help employees accomplish their duties faithfully and in line with the organization's needs. However, employees and HR managers are bound to encounter cases of employees who start to underperform. This is usually evidenced by a change in their work ethic and a reduction in the quality and deliverability of their outputs.

Poor performance can happen even to the best organizations. Dealing with it is also complicated since you will have to walk the line between helping an employee reach their potential and making sure the organization benefits from the competence they put into their work. It matters to know how to deal with employees who are constantly underperforming in ways that comply with the law and cater to the organization's interests. The guide below should give you a good idea of what to do with poor performers without stepping over ethical, legal, and practical grounds.



Photo by Timur Weber from Pexels

1. Check the person's performance reviews

Before you can deal with the problem directly, it pays to understand the context of why the employee is constantly falling short. You wouldn't want to take immediate action without insight and hard evidence, both of which can be observed in the employee's performance review. Going beyond what you see, check with the employee's supervisor and talk to them about the reasons why they're lagging in certain areas.

If productivity is an issue, check in with their supervisor and ask them what they think is causing them to fail in reaching their quotas or targets. Tardiness could also be a major issue affecting their performance, so ask their supervisor about the usual reasons they come to work late. Don't rely on what the reviews show. Dig deeper and look at the bigger story, so you will know how to deal with the problem with discernment and avoid making brash decisions that could lead to a wrongful dismissal or other more serious scenarios.

2. Schedule a private meeting

Once you have taken hold of the employee's performance review and understood the context of their poor performance, you may want to talk to the person privately as an HR manager. This presents the perfect opportunity to learn more about other factors affecting the person's productivity and diligence in the workplace. There may be problems beneath the surface that the HR department could help sort out.

What's more, you can use this time to assess the person's situation outside of work. Maintain an open mind and give as much space to the employee as possible so they can comfortably talk about issues they're either too scared or too embarrassed to share. A private meeting should be a safe space for them to talk about such factors, so long as you commit to your department's policy and the HR profession's code of ethics.

3. Recommend further training and mentorship

In some cases, there are individuals who perform better when they're led by the right people. Managers and supervisors play a significant role in helping team members reach their full potential. Leaders who fall short in providing guidance and support tend to reduce the motivation of their people, leading to many overlooking their value to the entire organization. Pairing an underperforming employee with the right mentor should help iron out such a problem. Consider assigning them to a different team under a reliable and experienced supervisor.

Other than mentorship, the employee might lack critical skills that allow them to perform their roles with competence. You can't always assume the people you hire are well-equipped to handle new tools and systems. Inexperience could be the reason why the employee isn't meeting expectations, so it matters to have them undergo retraining. You can also have them acquire new skills and prepare them for roles they're better suited for. Whichever the case, it matters to acknowledge that every employee is capable of bringing value to the organization. Some only need to be guided properly or equipped with the right skills.

4. Document their progress

Dealing with an underperforming employee requires coming up with an improvement plan detailing the courses of action to be undertaken. Whether you suggest having the employee undergo retraining or work under a more capable supervisor, their progress should be thoroughly monitored to see if there are any observable changes in their performance. Doing so will help you identify patterns and conditions in which the employee works optimally.

Throughout the process, it matters if you can schedule regular meetings where you can provide feedback and check whether the changes outlined in the improvement plan are working in full effect. This will also help the organization implement changes that could help address issues that affect employee engagement and career advancement.

5. Be ready to put your foot down

Keep in mind that helping an employee become better has its limits. As much as you want to keep them employed, you may have to enforce penalties for repeated performance failures. So long as these failures are caused by an employee's negative work ethic or lack thereof, your organization is well within its rights to take disciplinary action following labor laws. If stern warnings aren't enough, you can go for demotion or lawful termination, especially if the employee's actions suggest insubordination and gross neglect of duty.

Endnote

Underperformers exist in any organization, but that doesn't mean employers should leave them alone. Using the right legal means can help you turn their weakness into strengths that bring value to the organization.