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Sandra Wiley • Apr. 21, 2014



You may have heard it before, or you may have actually uttered these words, “Why did we wait so long to let an underperforming employee go?” In some firms today it may actually be called the underperforming epidemic or the underperformer drag, but no matter what words you are using to describe the problem, the results are the same – our firm suffers when the leaders do not take action.

The other word that I hear when talking about employees who are just doing “okay”

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company.”

Many of you are either in this category or you know another leader in your firm who feels this way. Please think about those situations where there is a person in the firm that you really would be okay about if they left for another opportunity. Now ask yourself, how are we managing them today?

1. We **point out their shortcomings** in blunt little comments that we hope they catch so that we don't really have to have a conversation with them. Really, has this ever worked to turn around a person's performance? Very unlikely.
2. We **reduce their job responsibilities**, which much of the time means that they get to do less for the same pay and transfers a higher workload to our super stars. Think about where the reward is happening in this scenario. Your underachiever is winning and your top talent is being punished.
3. **Fire them.** That can work, but sometimes this is shortsighted because we may have overlooked a way to manage them and make them better, so we lost a person when if we had simply worked with them in a different way they could have been amazing. You will never know.
4. **Do nothing.** Sadly this is the most common thing that is being done right now. Ignore it and the issues might “right themselves” or maybe the person will just go away. Again, not likely.

Rather than trying one of the strategies above, let's discover the strategies that will work for you, the underperformer, and, ultimately, the firm.

1. **Daily Communication.** This does not mean that you must have a face-to-face, hour-long meeting daily. An email, an instant message or a quick stop in their office are imperative to help connect the underperformer to the job requirements. These communications should be all about their performance not just personal issues.

2. Train your Supervisors – and get training yourself. Growing your knowledge and

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- When the firm is new, these are all parts of helping the underperformer improve his or her career to achieve a higher level of success. Identifying and showing support by correcting is imperative to the underperformers' ability to feel like they are important to the firm and the firm leaders.
4. **Tie their job to the overall firm goals.** All employees like to feel like what they're doing is important. They want to know that they are making a difference. The more you can tie what they are doing to the overall strategies of the firm, the more likely you will be to turn their performance around. This will not be as easy as it sounds. Enlisting their help in this is important. The other thing that may have to happen is you will need to watch them do the work as you talk through their responsibilities, and then have them do the work and watch them again!
 5. **Teach them** – don't just say "No." We have a habit of saying no automatically when our team members – especially the less experienced – come up with new ideas or ask questions. It is sometimes blatant and sometimes a little more subtle, but the message is sent with a megaphone to the team members, "Don't ask questions, just do your work." That is a killer to star performers and underperformers alike. There is a pretty easy fix in theory – stop, listen, allow! Stop what you are doing. Listen to the idea. Allow yourself to ask questions and clarify before you decide to move forward, get more information or stop the idea.
 6. **Write It All Down.** Make sure you capture all of the communications and work that you do with the underperformer. If the worst case scenario happens and you must terminate, you will want all of your hard work recorded.

Identify your underperformer and don't allow "drag" for one more day! Follow the steps above and work hard to change their results. However, if you don't see the improvements you want, don't be afraid to make the hard decision to let the person find other opportunities that will fit them better.

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