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How Do You Know When An Employee's Performance CAN'T Be Improved?

The Society for Advancement of Consulting® (SAC®) has asked its global membership to comment on how to determine when the best of efforts are still not enough to improve performance. SAC CEO Alan Weiss, PhD states, "Leaders aren't meant to be saviors. Sometimes they simply have to make very tough decisions about inability to perform."

"Unless you run an educational institution, you have no obligation to throw everything you've got at training an underperforming employee," says Ann Latham of Uncommon Clarity in Easthampton, MA. "You, your company, and all your employees, both superstars and underperformers, benefit most when people and their talents are well-matched to their positions. That should be your primary focus." Latham goes on to explain that once you've put an employee in a position, he or she deserves a chance to succeed and that could take both time and support. However, Latham recommends you save your time, money, and energy unless you are confident the employee 1) recognizes the gap between his performance and the expected performance, 2) demonstrates both desire and determination to close the gap, and 3) shows reasonable and steady progress.

"It will be apparent whether an employee's performance can be improved almost immediately after providing coaching and support," points out Lisa Anderson of LMA Consulting Group, Inc. in Claremont, CA. "In my experience, some employees will surprise you by transforming with coaching, and others you might think will improve will not rise to the occasion." According to Anderson, executives should implement performance feedback systems so that non-performers will be immediately visible. The three keys include: 1) 90 day plans with a limited number of goals, 2) immediate positive and corrective feedback on a daily basis, and 3) review and change plans as appropriate.

Dr. Maynard Brusman is a consulting psychologist and executive/career coach. He is the president of Working Resources, a strategic talent management consulting and leadership coaching firm in San Francisco, California. www.workingresources.com He offers a few insights:

"The Gallup Organization defines three types of employees," notes Dr. Brusman.

1. (29%) Engaged employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward.
2. (54%) Not-engaged employees are essentially “checked out.” They’re sleepwalking through their workday, putting in time—but not energy or passion—for their work.
3. (17%) Actively disengaged employees aren’t just unhappy at work; they’re busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish.

According to Dr. Brusman, “A good manager will identify those who are actively disengaged and explore the reasons for poor performance to determine if coaching or other interventions are appropriate. In some cases, people will respond favorably to opportunities to reconnect and rekindle their interest and enthusiasm for their jobs. Most people search for ways to make their lives and work meaningful and only disengage when they feel hopeless. For those people who are irreversibly immersed in negativity, the wise manager will look at termination procedures.”

“There’s an all too familiar refrain in the repeated excuses of an employee whose performance can no longer be improved,” says John Carroll, growth consultant, author and president of Unlimited Performance, Inc. in Mount Pleasant, SC (www.uperform.com) “It should become obvious to managers when numerous attempts to help the employee help himself or herself have no positive impact. What’s obvious is that this individual wants the manager or someone else to handle this project, role or task without blatantly refusing to do it.

“The ‘Excuse Me Blues’ chorus begins with I or I am followed by one or more of the following: confused, too busy, didn’t know, don’t know how, can’t find, couldn’t see, etc. You know the song because you’ve heard it before.”

Carroll says the parent/child relationship comes into play here as employees push the envelope to see just how little they can do while remaining employed. This is why many managers often report exhaustion, feeling that they’re raising children at home and at the office.

“When the individual’s critical numbers aren’t measuring up with little or no attempt to improve behavior or results and the song plays again, managers and leaders should take steps immediately. Free up that employee’s future, allowing the blues singer to find employment where he or she can be happy, productive and fulfilled.”

“There are two conditions under which employees’ performance cannot be improved,” states Pat Lynch, President of Business Alignment Strategies, Inc. (www.BusinessAlignmentStrategies.com) in Long Beach,

CA. “The first is that they are unable to perform—i.e., they lack the ability to do the work. The second is that they are unwilling to perform — i.e., they choose not to do the work.” However, Lynch cautions employers not to rush to judgment. She suggests that they first consider three performance-related factors that are management’s responsibility: 1) Do the employees know *what* to do? If not, the issue is communication, not performance. 2) Do employees know *how* to do the job? If not, there is a training issue. 3) Are there obstacles to performance such as lack of proper tools or equipment? This is a management issue.

Lynch notes that in her work with organizations in the public and private sectors, the most common reason she sees for employees’ failure to improve their performance is that they are in the wrong job. Simply stated, managers are not hiring and/or promoting qualified individuals. And although the misalignment manifests itself as a performance problem, the fact is that it is a staffing issue. The solution, according to Lynch, is for employers to set workers up for success by ensuring they have the necessary talent and ability to do the job, they know what to do and how to do it, and there are no obstacles to their performance.

“It’s understandable to want to help everyone,” concludes Weiss, “but ‘everyone’ must include customers and investors, so poorly performing employees who can’t be helped up need to be helped out.”

SAC is an international association of consulting professionals who subscribe to an industry code of ethics and have provided evidence of significant consulting results among their clients. For more information, please go to <http://www.consultingsociety.com>, write to info@summitconsulting.com, or call 800/825-6153 (401/886-4097).

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