

Commons Reasons for Poor Performance

People rarely come to work hoping to have a bad day and make a mess of their work.

1. Fear and anxiety	2. Unclear goals/lack of understanding
3. Lack of constructive feedback	4. Loss of confidence
5. Lack of knowledge	6. Personal issues
7. Lack of motivation	8. Physical issues/burn out

The cost of poor performance to a company is high, but so is the cost of turnover if a person leaves. The optimal outcome when dealing with non-performers is to identify the cause, minimise or eliminate it, and achieve or resume performance which meets or exceeds expectations.

1. Fear and anxiety

Fear is one of the most common causes of poor performance. There can be many catalysts. Fear due to a colleague's or client's personal style, tone of voice, body language, reputation, level of seniority, or it may even have started through a misunderstanding.

It might be fear of failure, a previous mistake that led to feeling embarrassed or humiliated, negative comments, or feedback which is not as constructive as it could be. It could be fear caused by lack of attention or perceived manager disinterest, or even too much or unusual interest.

Whatever the cause, the problem can spiral and become crippling if not identified and rectified. If you suspect fear is the issue, it's important to consider what the causes might be, and then talk to the individual in a very kind, non-confrontational way. Regular support, patience and encouragement can go a long way to getting things back on track.

2. Unclear goals/lack of understanding

When people don't understand what needs to be done, where it fits in the bigger picture, or what the steps are to achieving the task, they are likely to struggle. Some people in this situation will ask questions until they do understand, but others are fearful this will make them look stupid, so they stay silent hoping help will come to them or the issue will go away.

For those people who don't clarify expectations, the longer the time that elapses, the less able they are to correct things and ask for help. If you suspect this is the issue, simply ask the person to

repeat back their understanding of what they have been asked to do. This is a great way to uncover gaps in understanding and clarify things immediately.

3. Lack of knowledge or competency

This is where the person understands what needs to be done, but simply doesn't have the knowledge or skill to be able to complete it. For example, they may know that the objective is to bake an apple pie, but if they don't know where to get the ingredients and have never baked before, the task could be so daunting that they either perform badly or choose not to do it.

If assigning new work to a person, this can be avoided by asking questions to identify competency levels and prior experience. If you suspect there may be a gap between existing and necessary skills or knowledge, it is best to support/help the person the first time they do something new.

4. Lack of motivation

This can have many causes. Not understanding the big picture, not feeling valued, not feeling challenged, and not feeling rewarded. People are motivated by different things. Some people are intrinsically motivated; in other words their motivation comes from the enjoyment or satisfaction of doing something. Others are extrinsically motivated - their motivation comes from external sources e.g. praise, money.

If you don't understand what motivates each team member, you could find your attempts to motivate them are wasted. Avoid assuming they will be motivated by the things that matter to you or taking a 'one size fits all' approach. Talk to them and find out what matters most to them, what they enjoy and dislike, what a good day looks like to them, and what motivates them to do good work.

5. Insufficient constructive feedback

Feedback is an important part of supporting growth and increased productivity. To have an impact, give timely, constructive, on-the-job feedback as well as more formal feedback, ideally twice a year.

If on-the-job feedback isn't given, it makes it very difficult for a person to know how they are doing and their areas for development. For feedback to have the maximum benefit, it must be given at the time, or soon after the realisation things aren't right. Then they can fully understand the context and change, or be aware of the learning required.

Waiting for weeks, or in some cases months, leaves the person unaware and with no chance of making a change. Good feedback is constructive and includes the expectation of exactly how you would like it to be done in the future.

Telling anyone they have performed badly and focusing on the negative rather than solving the issue is proven to be counterproductive. It's likely to be met with denial, defensiveness, and a drop in motivation levels.

By taking the time to frame the feedback constructively you are more likely to get buy-in and the improvement sought. Try a sandwich, i.e., talk about something they are doing well, talk about the issue and what you want done next time, and then finish with another genuinely positive aspect of their performance. Leaving people with a positive feeling will help motivate them to resolve any issues.

6. Loss of confidence

It's a good idea to keep in mind that people and relationships are more important than getting a task done. If you deal with a situation in the right way then usually both the relationship and the performance will improve.

Mistakes are how we all learn and there are no exceptions. The response to those mistakes can make the difference between a person picking themselves up and trying again or losing confidence and becoming afraid to try new things or step out of their comfort zone. Always deal with mistakes in a calm, measured, rational, and constructive way. Help the person to identify what they need to learn and do differently next time.

7. Personal issues

Everybody has personal issues from time to time that may impact on their performance. Illness of a loved one, issues with children, marriage problems, addictions, etc.

Some people are fairly open with what's going on at home, others prefer to keep their private lives private. While respecting that, it is not advisable to ignore a drop in performance or changes in behaviour once they impact the workplace. It may only take a private expression of concern, to alert a person to the fact their personal issue is impacting others, for the situation to improve.

In more serious cases it may be advisable to offer external confidential support such as counselling. Although the personal issue may not strictly be the employer's problem, if the provision of such support gets them back on the road to full performance more quickly, it may be a good option. It is never advisable to assume the role of counsellor yourself. External experts achieve results faster, and maintain the line between personal and professional lives.

8. Physical issues/burnout

Poor performance may also be caused by physical illness or burnout. Illnesses all have their own specific set of symptoms but, regardless of the cause, once resilience is low, things usually

compound and people may start to have difficulty sleeping, become irritable, get headaches, aches and pains, etc. If these warning signs are ignored, they may escalate and impact not only their own performance, but also the performance of those around them.

People suffering from burnout may lose their sense of reason, and resist your initial attempts to get them to slow down or take a break. It may be necessary to enforce a period of rest appropriate to the severity of the issue or reassign workload until the situation improves. It is ideal to spot these symptoms early to avoid it becoming a greater issue or ultimately a departure.

Tips for speedy resolution

Whatever the cause(s) of poor performance, here are a few tips for speedy resolution:

1. Be alert to changes in behaviour and performance and address promptly. Waiting rarely improves the situation.
2. Think about the situation and likely causes before you talk to the person, and be careful not to jump to conclusions or start a process prematurely. That may mean putting aside frustration that has arisen and suspending judgement. Be as kind and considerate as you can while you work through the process of identifying exactly what is going on. It may save you all sorts of trouble, embarrassment, or criticism.
3. Actively listen to what the person is saying. Try to look beyond the words to get an idea if they are holding back. Once they have finished talking, it is often good to ask, "Is there anything else you think I need to know?"
4. If you are going to stand a good chance of resolving issues, it's important to be prepared to accept feedback and look objectively at your own behaviour or processes, if they prove to be contributing to the issue.
5. Be supportive but also very careful you don't take over the problem yourself.
6. In some circumstances you can solve the issue faster by reallocating work temporarily to allow the person to get on top of things. Take time to consider the implications of this and if the situation warrants it. Health issues are a good example where it can work well.
7. If you feel out of your depth for any reason, seek advice or support from an expert as soon as you can.