

Performance Management: Why we do it and how to avoid the pitfalls

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One of the biggest challenges any grower or employer faces is managing its people. Human beings have moods, differing motivations and emotions and harnessing all of these to get everyone on the same page and pulling in the same direction can be hard and frustrating. However, if you are successful in doing this, the rewards and improved business outcomes can skyrocket.



Managing your employees' performance is not only good for business, it is what your employees want you to do, even if they would never admit that publicly. By setting standards and measuring their performance against those standards, you are treating them fairly, ensuring that everyone pulls their weight and does their fair share.

If poor performers are not managed, then this can cause feelings of inequity and decrease employees' motivation to perform at their best.

Employees cost money and just like any of the business resources, it is imperative that the business gets the most value for that money spent. You have invested time, training and money into every employee and so it makes good financial sense to attempt to improve their

performance, rather than to just dismiss them from their employment and start again. This does not mean that underperforming employees should not be dismissed, however dismissal should not be the first option.

Causes of poor performance

Generally, performance issues can be categorised in one of two areas as being either an attitude issue, where the issue is caused by the employee's general attitude towards his or her work or an aptitude issue where the issue is caused by a gap in skill or knowledge. Clearly, the latter is easier to manage as usually training or mentoring can address the cause.

Deal with it early – don't let it fester

The first tip in dealing with underperformance is to get onto it early and in a timely fashion. Avoid the temptation to let things slide in an attempt to avoid confrontation.

If performance issues are not addressed in a timely fashion, there is a risk that the consequences of the employee's poor performance will increase your frustration and you will end up being harsh and confrontational when you raise the issues with the employee.

This, in turn, could get the employee's back up and increase resentment on their part. All of this does not make an environment that is conducive to improving performance.

Plan how you will deliver feedback

The second tip is to plan the feedback that you will be giving the employee. Consider not just the areas that they need developing in or the gaps in their performance but also the areas that they are strong in. Is it possible to use the employees' strengths to assist in improving their weaknesses?

Have evidence that supports the feedback that you are giving. If an issue with the employee is that they are always late for work, show them evidence that supports that. It is hard for anyone to dispute a performance issue if there is evidence supporting it.

Finally, consider how the feedback is to be given. There are a number of techniques that can be used and this is where your knowledge of the employee and how they operate will be valuable. Not everyone will respond positively to the one technique. It is also important that the feedback be impersonal and reflect the employee's work or skills, not themselves as a person.

A common technique is to use a feedback sandwich where you provide positive feedback, followed by the constructive feedback that you want to see the employee improve. Many people end with another positive bit of feedback but that is not always necessary. Another technique is to characterise the feedback as information on the consequences of their gap in skill. For example, instead of telling the employee they are always late for work, try saying to them, "When you are not able to consistently arrive at work on time, it causes a backlog for other employees who rely on the work you do, so I would be very grateful if you could please concentrate on starting on time for the next three weeks."

Start with an informal meeting

Try and deal with performance issues on an informal basis first. This is more likely to engage the employee, get their buy-in and resolve the issues. If that doesn't work, then you can commence the formal process. However, if you start formally, it is almost impossible to then step back and try an informal process.

Create a safe environment

Once you have planned what feedback you are going to give and how you are going to deliver the feedback, arrange to meet with the employee on an informal basis. Try and consider the environment where the meeting is taking place.

The meeting should be held in some privacy, away from other employees but not be in a strictly formal setting. If possible, try and meet one to one with the employee.

Aim to solve the problem together

At the meeting, deliver the feedback. Give the employee an opportunity to respond to the feedback and if they disagree to explain why. The employee's response will also indicate to you whether the gaps in their performance are caused by an attitude or aptitude issue. If the employee is resistant to the feedback and will not engage in the resolution of the issues, it is very likely that the issues are attitude ones.

Ask questions of the employee to try and identify the causes or root of the problems. Once these causes are identified, then work with the employee on solutions or actions that can be taken to address the performance issues. Create an action plan on the steps that will be taken to address the issues and when or by what date these steps will be taken.

Always remember, as the employer, you have the right to set the performance standards and expectations that employees must adhere to, provided that they are reasonable. Also, whilst it is helpful to gain the employee's agreement on identifying the performance issues and actions to be taken to address them, it is not strictly necessary.

Once the action plan has been set, monitor its progress and check in regularly with the employee. If the issues become resolved, congratulate the employee and celebrate the success.

Moving to a formal process

If the performance issues remain or in your opinion, there is insufficient improvement in the employee's performance, it is now time to commence the formal process.

Just as it was important to consider the environment for the informal meeting, it is just as important for the formal meeting. Inform the employee of the time of the meeting and that serious discussions need to take place about their performance.

If the employee asks to bring a support person, allow them to bring one, or even better, offer them the opportunity to bring a support person. Telling the employee that they can bring a support person indicates that the meeting will be serious.



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At the meeting, provide the feedback to the employee on their performance but concentrate on the areas where they have been underperforming. Refer to the feedback provided in the informal meeting and the action plan that was developed, highlighting actions that were not done at all or by the due date. Update the action plan and provide stricter timelines for the actions to be completed.

Finally, warn the employee that if their performance does not improve sufficiently, they risk being terminated from their employment. This warning is essential, because one of the factors that the Fair Work Commission considers when determining whether a dismissal was harsh, unjust, or unreasonable is whether an employee dismissed for poor performance was given a warning.

Confirm all of this discussion and action plan in writing after the meeting.

Monitor the progress of the action plan and closely supervise the employee.

Terminating an employee

If the underperformance issues continue, we are now at the point where, despite the training and investment put into the employee, their employment is no longer worthwhile.

Meet with the employee one final time and again offer them the opportunity to bring a support person. Provide the employee with the feedback on their performance and allow them the opportunity to respond. If the employee's response does not satisfy you, you can then proceed to terminate the employee's employment. Advise the employee of their termination and then follow this up in writing after the meeting.

Most performance issues, when addressed in a timely manner will resolve in the informal process and when managed properly, it is rare for these issues to result in an employee's dismissal. However, if termination of the employee's employment does occur, at least you have made every effort to get as much value as you can from the employee.

Disclaimer

The above advice is general in nature and should not be relied upon. If you would like specific advice on your circumstances and situation, please speak to your industrial relations specialist. Stephen Farrell runs through a practical guide for performance management in this 30-minute VegetablesWA webinar: Performance Management - A Practical Guide for Growers <https://youtu.be/Ybt8IOpyikl>

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