

**Mastering
poor
performers**

Chapter 6

How to deal with poor performers

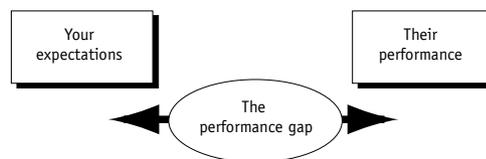
Sooner or later all managers, no matter how effective they are, have to deal with a difficult person or poor performer. It is always easy to give good news to someone but for most of us the prospect of having to give bad news presents a more challenging task. Many managers feel deeply uncomfortable about having to give negative feedback for fear of provoking a hostile reaction, damaging relationships or simply upsetting someone. But the fact is that managing sometimes involves telling people things that they may not want to hear.

Giving negative feedback constructively severely tests a manager's people skills, so it is crucial to know not just how to do it but also how to deal with the problems that can arise. Dealing with poor performers requires us to draw on certain areas of knowledge that we have already referred to, such as objective setting and influencing skills.

Some classic problem people types that we may have to deal with may include the:

- **Excuse giver** I couldn't because of
- **Fault finder** But it was the logistics' department fault.
- **Whinger** But the equipment was not up to scratch.
- **Late deliverer** It will be ready in another week, I promise.
- **Inept** Sorry I didn't realise.
- **Slow learner** I just need a bit more time to get the hang of things.

Each of these characters must be dealt with in a structured and formal manner if they are to be made to realise the error of their ways.



Managing poor performers – a quick route map

Guide to Best Practice



Managing the performance gap

Establish the existing performance gap

- Check the facts on performance.
- Check the objectives you previously agreed.
- Always focus on the facts and issues not the personality.

Explore the performance gap

- Use open questions (what, when, where, how and who).

Ask

- Why is it happening? What factors are creating the gap?

Listen to the answers being given

- Find out whether the problem is due to:
 - personal grievances
 - personal problems (ill health, home difficulties etc)
 - outdated rules/procedures
 - genuine discipline problem
 - personality(s) clashes
 - unclear objectives
 - need for more training or help on the job.
 - incompetence.

Eliminate the performance gap

- Agree an improvement plan if it is clear that poor performance is not the result of a grievance or personal problem.

Agreeing performance targets

After having discussed the performance problems the next step is to agree some new performance targets and ensure that you set some clear objectives. Use the SMART acronym to focus the problem person and begin to effect an improvement in their performance.

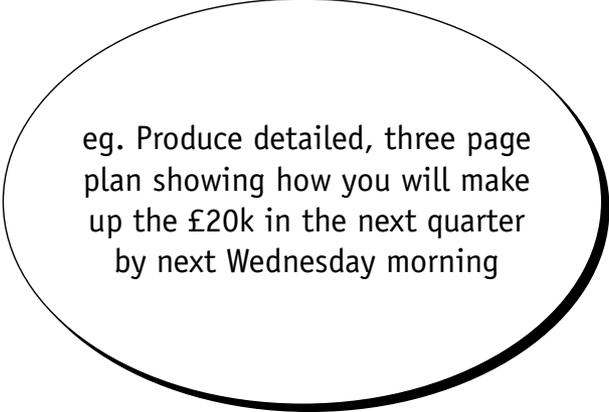
Specific

Measurable

Achievable

Realistic

Timely



eg. Produce detailed, three page plan showing how you will make up the £20k in the next quarter by next Wednesday morning

Agree a specific date to agree when you will both meet to review progress.

If it is a grievance or personal problem which is causing the poor performance:

- 1 Resolve the problem on the spot: re-allocate work, explain and deal with whatever is worrying the person or whatever else may be the formula to redress the grievance.

OR

- 2 Promise to go away and think the point over. State that you will come back to them with an answer within X amount of time.

The poor performance caricatures

The type	Their behaviour
Roger The Dodger	'Didn't you get my message'
The Injured Bystander	'Surely you are not accusing me'
The Confessor	'Yes, I know it's all my fault...'
The Buck Passer	'Yes, if only sales had not taken so long...'
The Part Time Lawyer	'All of us think...'
The Fox	Hardly speaks – except to seek further explanation.
The Cry baby	Uses tears and emotion to weaken management's resolve.
The Resigner	'Well, if that's the way you feel I guess I will have to re-consider my position.'
The Depressive	'I know I'm useless...'
The Counter Attacker	'Are you telling me how to do my job?'

With each of these people the solution is to:-

- Be firm.
- Stick to the facts and get them to address the real issues.
- Get them to explain specific behaviours or actions rather than generalities.

- Pin them down to **agree to** and **deliver** specific changes within certain times.
- Then monitor their performance.

Key Learning Point



How to give negative feedback successfully

Giving feedback is the way we either recognise successes or deliver negative news about someone's professional or technical competence or their interpersonal communications.

Feedback can of course be based on clear performance standards or opinions. When using the latter, we must ensure any feedback we give is fair and based on some kind of real evidence or facts. Failure to do so may result in conflicts or disputes arising.

Giving feedback normally involves us conveying:

Empathy

By displaying active listening and demonstrating understanding. Avoiding and resisting any immediate judgements or reactions.

Respect

Through sharing feelings and respecting people's rights and sense of integrity and self respect.

Genuineness

By reflecting and talking about experiences that maybe appropriate to the circumstances. Being sincere and adopting a positive and constructive tone throughout the discussion.

Using the praise sandwich technique: a quick checklist

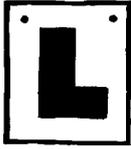
Action Checklist



As we have said, whilst it is easy to praise an individual it is often more difficult to give bad news or feedback on poor performance. The following rules relate to what is commonly called the praise sandwich. Before using this technique it is important to recognise that you have to be in the business of developing long-term capability. If you are two weeks short of dismissing someone then the approach outlined below will not be appropriate. This approach demands a desire to engage in a long-term working relationship which is based on developing someone's capability and potential:

- **Start with a positive comment** – if a positive is registered first, any subsequent negative is more likely to be listened to and acted upon.
- **Be specific and focus only on the individual's behaviour** – pinpoint behaviour that people are able to change – 'In chairing meetings you tend to talk over people'. Follow this feedback with specific examples 'for example last Monday...'
- **Describe the event** – 'You give vague instructions'. Don't evaluate by giving more emotive feedback such as 'You give terrible instructions'. This always inflames feelings.
- **Use 'I' statements** – 'I feel that you...'. This makes the feedback more concrete and more likely to be listened to – after all it is your view that you are expressing, not a universal truth!
- **Ask whether the other person can see your point of view** – and whether they can think of anything they can do differently.
- **Suggest alternative ways of approaching the problem** – give them a clue about the outcome you would prefer.
- **Don't overload** – people can only handle up to three pieces of negative feedback in one session.

Key Learning Point



Receiving feedback

As the receiver of feedback, you may be selective in what you hear. To avoid this common problem you may like to observe the following rules:

- Listen first, postpone any initial reactions.
- Be clear about what's being said.
- Probe until there is something you can act on.
- Check with others to verify the validity of the comments.
- Remember it is your choice whether to accept or reject the feedback.

Action point avoiding the Piggy Bank Syndrome

A trap that many managers fall into when managing their people is to avoid giving negative feedback at an early and appropriate stage. All too often we fail to deliver the negative feedback at the time when the problem incident occurred. Instead we collect the problems in a mental piggy bank until such time that the individual makes such a mistake or problem that we then break open our piggy bank and confront the individual with a tirade of past misdemeanours. Unfortunately this all too often results in a reaction from the individual 'But you never told me that' or 'I didn't know that'!

Action Checklist



The ten rules of feedback

All these rules spring from the fundamental principle that people have a right to their individuality and integrity.

1 Offer feedback on people behaviour(s), not their attitudes.

What you saw someone actually doing, rather than what you think they were thinking or intending; 'You were gripping that pencil so tightly that your knuckles went white' rather than 'You were very aggressive'.

2 Offer a description of what you saw and how you felt, rather than a judgement.

'When you started to shout, I felt anxious' rather than 'It was a bad idea to raise your voice'.

3 Focus on behaviour(s) which can be changed.

It is not helpful to tell someone that an eye twitch is a distraction. A persistent drumming on the table with a hand or tapping of the foot, can however be changed and so you can give feedback on these points.

4 Select behaviours or issues that are critical – limit yourself to those.

Nobody can concentrate on changing everything at once. Set priorities before you give feedback and concentrate on important points, not minor details.

5 Ask questions of the other person rather than make statements.

By asking questions we allow the person receiving the feedback the responsibility to reach their own conclusions about the issues.

'What do you think will happen if this situation continues?'
rather than

'You need to pull your socks up and get sorted out!'

6 Establish the ground rules in advance.

Tell people by what criteria or standards they are to be judged by.

7 Comment on the positives, as well as the problems – but be sincere!

It is important that people feel strengthened by any feedback process if they are to work on improving their performance. If feedback leaves them feeling inadequate or humiliated, it will have been counter-productive.

At the same time It is particularly important to realise that any praise is sincere. People see through comments that lack sincerity.

8 Relate feedback to specific behaviours: don't waffle on about general feelings or impressions.

'I liked it when you went to the door to let him in' is preferable to 'There was a very friendly atmosphere'. Because the feedback is specific the person receiving it can learn from it and replicate the behaviour again. You cannot 'do' a friendly atmosphere again.

9 Observe personal limits.

If you overload people with negative feedback they may turn off or in some cases become hostile. Recognise that we all have tolerance levels that should not be breached.

10 Before offering feedback consider its value for the receiver.

If there is no benefit to be given keep quiet and forget about it.

Finally, remember to keep any negative feedback you give private and confidential – preserve people's integrity and self respect.