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Managing poor performance: Top Tips for managers in leading the self, others and with context.

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Introduction:

Effectively addressing poor performance in the workplace is essential for organisational leadership, as it directly impacts efficiency, productivity, and employee development. When an employee fails to meet expectations, it not only affects team confidence but also undermines overall organisational success. Hence, effective management of poor performance is essential for maintaining a healthy work environment and achieving business goals. A variety of causes involved in poor performance in the workplace such as lack of knowledge or awareness, lack of skill or ability, lack of motivation and lack of resources, obstacles and personal issues (Marr, 2024; MTCT, 2024; The Peak performance centre, 2024).

Managers need to explore the root causes of poor performance before taking steps to address it. This understanding can help in developing effective strategies to support employees in improving their performance (Marr, 2024).

This paper explores a common case

scenario of an underperformer, the reflective observations of the team in managing this person and *Top Tips* for managers supporting underperformers in the workplace.

Concrete Experience: Case study

Taylor [pseudonym], an employee, is facing challenges in the workplace and whose performance does not seem to be adequate for their appointed role. Colleagues have observed that Taylor is unable to perform all of their duties; they describe 'carrying Taylor a lot'. Taylor misses deadlines and often doesn't seem to understand what their role entails. The manager believes that Taylor's poor performance is due to a combination of factors, including wellbeing, procedural knowledge and motivation.

The manager has also recently received emails from other colleagues complaining about Taylor's performance when they are working together. The manager has been keeping a close eye on Taylor and also keeping a log of Taylor's underperformance, which includes not responding to emails, not carrying out assigned tasks, or not completing work to a satisfactory standard. The manager feels that they have a duty of care to Taylor to investigate any issues concerning their underperformance and also to protect the business needs. The manager knows that Taylor has a medical condition which may be playing a part in their underperformance and thinks a referral to occupational health would be appropriate. The manager must make Taylor aware

that they are underperforming at work. The manager has invited Taylor for an informal chat to see how they feel about their performance of late, and if there is anything that can be done to support Taylor in the workplace.

Reflective Observation:

The case study presented describes a scenario that we are all familiar with in our workplaces. We have all been in situations where we have noticed that a particular colleague's performance is poor, or has been declining, along with their motivation and attitude towards their roles. The scenario highlights the importance of identifying performance gaps and supporting employees to improve. It also emphasises the need for specific articulation of underperformance and the development of a beneficial strategy to aid both the organisation and the employee.

Reflecting as a team on this scenario has enabled us to identify some key factors leading to underperformance. These include consistently missed goals and objectives, nonadherence to organisational procedures, decreased quality and quantity of work, lack of motivation and enthusiasm, increased errors and mistakes, and a lack of teamwork.

We recognise that when this occurs, it is the responsibility of the manager to work alongside employees like Taylor, to develop positive solutions and support the colleagues to increase their performance at work. As managers, the key areas we should

recognise and consider are:

- *Leadership styles*
- *Providing feedback*
- *Setting clear and realistic goals and expectations*
- *Managing staff motivation and wellbeing*

Reflecting on this scenario, we have together developed the following 'top tips' to guide new managers in supporting underperformers. These Top Tips are modelled on the University of Kent's Leadership Behaviours Framework (LBF) (University of Kent, 2024). This framework has been developed using academic research and lived experiences of managers within the institution and is designed to support the development of leadership behaviours and drive success.

The recommendations for managers have been provided and separated into three main categories which align with the LBF. These categories are:

Leading self: *Demonstrating the behaviour yourself, in a way that is evident to others.*

Leading others: *Encouraging, developing, inspiring and empowering others to demonstrate the behaviour.*

Leading with context: *Leading in your area in a way that aligns with organisational objectives and embeds the behaviour within the culture of the University (p.3).*

Top Tips for Managers

Leading Self:

Consider what leadership style(s) are most appropriate for that employee and their current situation.

Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory (Kenton, 2024) suggests that there is no single leadership style which is superior to others. Instead, it suggests that leaders adapt their style based on the individuals or team members who would be impacted and the context which surrounds the situation.

Using this theory, and the scenario outlined above involving Taylor. The manager supporting Taylor should consider which leadership approaches might best support Taylor to improve his performance.

Consider the benefits of using coaching to support progress.

The University of Kent's People and Culture Strategy 2025 (Atkinson, 2025) actively promotes the use of coaching practice within the workplace. Coaching refers to and often uses questioning techniques to support employees in finding the solutions to problems themselves or exploring opportunities to develop.

An effective method for facilitating coaching is by using the GROW model (Witmore, 1992). The GROW model refers to a method which supports framing your questioning. The four-step

process is as follows:

Goal – what do you want to achieve?

Reality- where are you now? What needs to change?

Options- what options do you have?

Will – what can you do to achieve this?

Managers should consider when and how coaching might support getting the best out of their employees. In the situation of Taylor, coaching may support Taylor to consider their performance and set goals to amend it.

Adopt an action centred leadership model (ACLM) to support reviewing the team's performance more effectively.

ACLM refers to a set of principles which can be applied to different situations to support effective leadership (MTCT, no date). To achieve these leaders should consider three separate but interlinked areas of leadership (Figure 1).

In the case of Taylor, separating these areas may highlight specific areas where Taylor needs additional support or training.

Leading Others:

Utilise the AID feedback model to support conversations around performance.

As outlined in the case scenario, it is clear that further action surrounding Taylor's performance is needed. This will include the need for their line

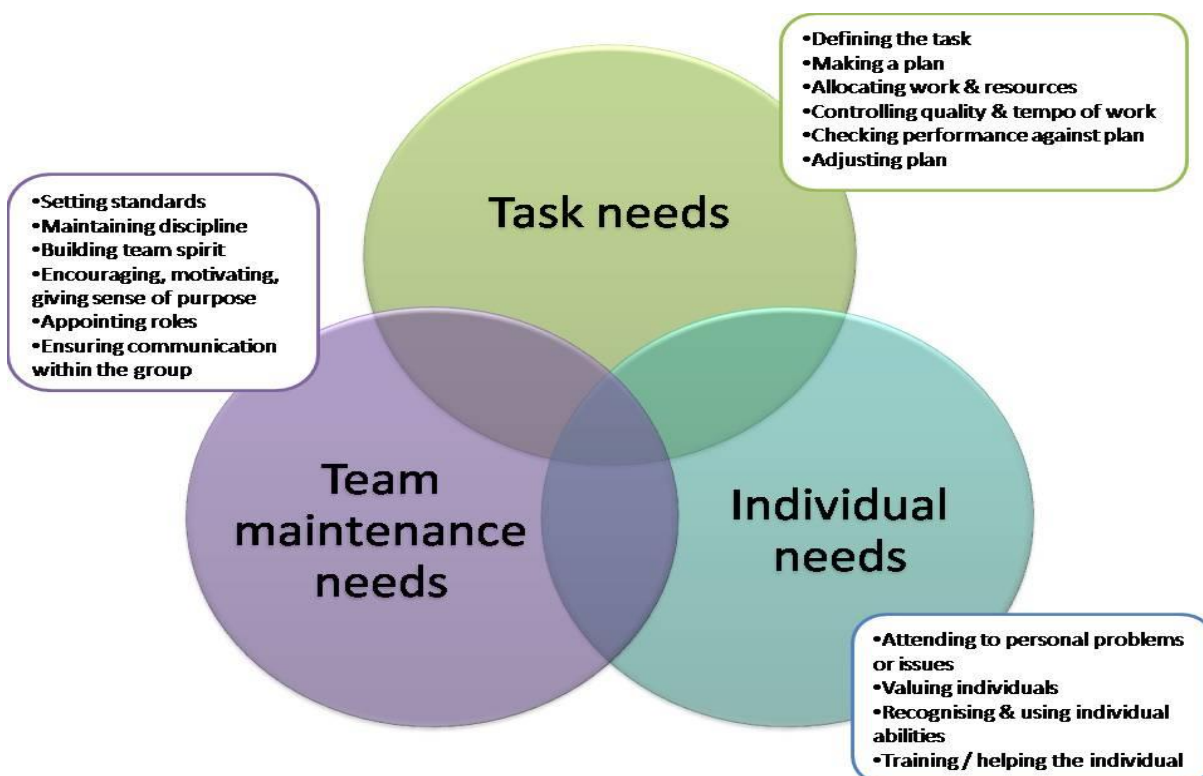


Figure 1: John Adair Model

(source: <http://www.teamworkinnovationz.com/leadership-training-details/john-adair-model/>)

manager to provide clear feedback. The AID feedback module refers to Action, Impact, and Do Differently (Sales Training, 2023, no page):

Action – describes what has been observed.

Impact – highlights the impact the observed action has had which can be either positive or negative.

Do differently – creates a discussion as to how the actions of the individual can be amended to support positive change.

In the case of Taylor, this may include steps to support them in reaching deadlines. By adopting this model, a manager can provide specific feedback which is delivered in a way that supports positive change.

Set clear, realistic expectations and goals to support change.

In the case of Taylor, providing SMART(ER) goals with feedback will include an opportunity for Taylor and their manager to evaluate their progress and review. This would be an important step in enabling Taylor to see where they are improving and where need more focus (Figure 2).

Be aware of and signpost where necessary to wellbeing support available within your organisation.

Leaders are ultimately responsible for the well-being of their teams. It is

| | | |
|----------|-------------------|---|
| S | SPECIFIC | What is the SPECIFIC goal you want to achieve? The more detail, the better. |
| M | MEASURABLE | How will you MEASURE the goal? How will you track progress and know once you have achieved it? |
| A | ACHIEVABLE | Can you ACHIEVE the goal? What skills do you have and which ones will you need to obtain? |
| R | RELEVANT | How important is the goal to you? Is it RELEVANT to your values and get you towards your purpose? |
| T | TIMEBOUND | When does this need to happen? What is the end-date? Why does it need to be TIMEBOUND? |
| E | EVALUATE | How did you perform? What can you learn? EVALUATE your progress to get better results. |
| R | REWARD | When and how will you celebrate? REWARDS help to build sustainable habits. |

Figure 2: SMARTER Goals

(Source: <https://developtheedge.com/securing-success-by-setting-smarter-goals/>)

important to consider what else may be impacting an employee's performance and what support is available to help with this.

In the case of Taylor, the manager is aware of a medical condition which could impact performance. Finding out whether there is additional support available at the institution to support this condition could be an important step in managing their performance. Large organisations such as Higher Education Institutions will often have a range of different support available and keeping abreast of the available support could be integral to a team's success.

***Leading with context:
Involve employees in problem-solving:***

Employees often have some of the best experiences to be able to solve problems. This can particularly be the case for employees who are unwilling to or struggling to manage change. Involving these employees in the problem-solving process may boost

morale and also bring quicker and more effective solutions.

In the case of Taylor, listening to their concerns, finding out what problems they are facing and supporting them to problem solve (potentially via coaching) could support them in bringing about effective change in their performance.

Understand what motivates employees.

Having an awareness of the different types of motivation which drive individuals will support them in better understanding them and their aspirations. This can also support further development as you may wish to tailor the learning opportunities or responsibilities allocated.

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