

Coaching the poor performer



Barry Johnson and Mandy Geal

Why is performance coaching so effective?

Introduction

In exploring the causes of and cures for poor performance at work, we were overcome by a deluge of bureaucracy to do with strategies and procedures, particularly disciplinary procedures, and so much use of the word ‘counselling’ that it sounded to us as if we were in a disciplinary interview. So we looked back at our experience and decided to write this module.

What is a poor performer?

It is unlikely that the client you are dealing with sets out wanting to do a bad job.

Poor performance is ‘when an employee’s behaviour or performance falls below the required standard’. Therefore, a person needs to know what constitutes an acceptable level of

performance, below which their manager will consider their performance poor. This is not easy, particularly when objectives and job descriptions don’t really give all the information. Performance standards need to be agreed between the manager and the person.

To be clear exactly what the poor performance is, you may ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the specific behaviour identified as poor performance? If I were to video the poor performance, what would I see on the screen and what would I hear the person say?
- How is this behaviour adversely affecting the department?
- Would any other manager or supervisor or colleague see the same behaviour as poor

performance, or are my expectations too high?

- Am I generalising from a few idiosyncrasies or too little evidence?

On talking to people rated as poor performers, it seems first one thing goes wrong, then another, and before the person knows it they have developed a reputation – and that just worsens the downward slide.

Key learning points

- ◆ Identifying poor performance.
- ◆ If there is an underlying problem, poor performance may simply be a symptom.
- ◆ Key elements of poor performance.
- ◆ The benefits of a coaching approach to poor performance.
- ◆ The attitudes and attributes of an effective performance coach.

The benefits of coaching in the poor performance situation

- More productive behaviour. The first objective of coaching is to resolve the poor performance. If it’s done properly, then that’s what you’ll achieve.
- The person knows what’s expected. Coaching makes it clear to the person what is expected of them and helps them achieve it. A trap is assuming that the poor performer knows what’s expected.
- The person is motivated to change. The only real motivation is internal motivation. Coaching creates an environment in which the person makes the decision to change for themselves. This means that they’re more committed to the change and it’s more likely to happen. It’s also easier on the manager and the organisation because they don’t have to hold the threat of disciplinary action over the person. We believe the greatest obstacle to improving the performance of a poor performer is the threat of disciplinary action. The greatest incentive to improving performance is help and support.
- The person knows that you and the organisation care. If you coach (in the way we’re going to look at), you will be seen as supportive and understanding. The person and others will see the organisation, the manager and you in a positive win-win light.
- Coaching ensures a happy and motivated department. That means better results, the manager and organisation achieving their outcomes – and there’s much less hassle all round.

The effective performance improvement coach

This has two parts. Firstly there is the overall attitude of the coach, and secondly the coaching elements.

Coach’s attitude

- Gives people good information.
- Treats people as adults.
- Supports their decisions.

Coaching elements

- Builds rapport, enabling communication and reducing resistance to suggestions.
- Observes and seeks information on behaviour and feelings; listens to what is being said and uncovers underlying meanings. Seeks clarification; reflects back what has been said, summarises, reflects feelings and seeks proposals.
- Ensures the learning objectives are clear so the learner and the coach recognise success.
- Works from the individual’s needs.
- Elicits what the person will do to improve performance.
- Provides a shoulder for the person to cry on without becoming emotionally involved.

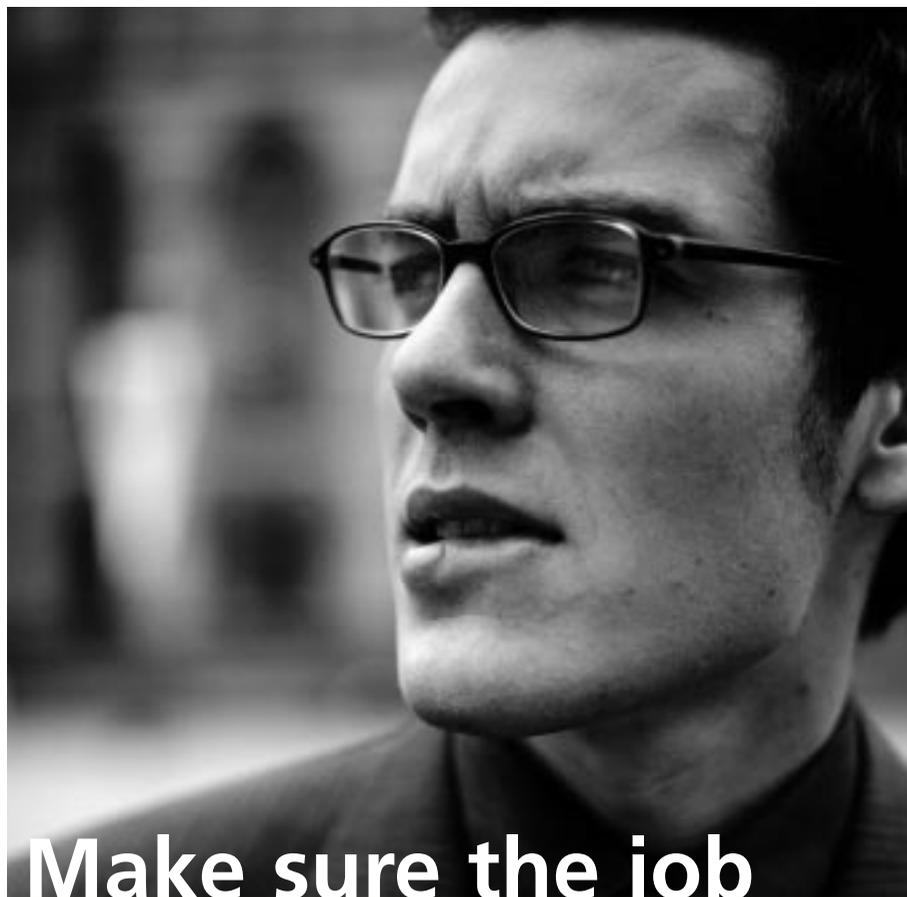
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- Uses activities based on real tasks and real situations the person faces, such as how to handle interactions with a divorce solicitor.
- Models, or exposes the learner to a model of, effective performance.
- Observes the learner in action and gives regular feedback covering both what the person did and how they did it, focusing on what was done well so that the person learns from success.
- Enables a person to see something about their own behaviour or knowledge, which they wouldn’t otherwise have seen.
- Understands the organisational requirements.

Conclusion

The key issues are to coach the person to eliminate the real problem, not just the symptoms of the problem. If the cure for the problem is apparently outside direct coaching, the person may still have to be coached to handle that other solution. Disciplinary approaches are no solution. They are an admittance of failure to manage and help the person appropriately.



Make sure the job holder knows the required standard

We had a female employee whose time keeping was erratic. Her colleagues resented this and everything she did was scrutinised and criticised. Exploration revealed that the bus service she used was unpredictable and unreliable. She would have had to arrive excessively early in order to start on time, or take the risk of being marginally late – as she was, more often than not. Flexitime cured the problem. It took much longer, however, to dispel the ill-feeling some colleagues had built up and for her to have the normal minor performance shortfalls we all perpetrate accepted. Having flexitime for all staff helped – after all, she triggered it.

Lesson. Tackle any and every performance problem early.

We don't believe people set out to be poor performers.

Now we have the symptoms, what we need is the cause.

Diagnosis

Perhaps most of us at some time have not performed well. We may have been faced with a job we did not know how to tackle, or have lost self-confidence, or were made miserable by some factor at home or at work or in our personal health and well-being. Equally, we may have had a boss with

whom we did not gel or a series of bosses who behaved very differently, with different values and different priorities. The reasons for poor performance can be many and if the reason for the poor performance is overcome, then performance improves. The diagnosing element is perhaps the most problematic. Much of the observed behaviour will be a symptom, not a cause. Most poor performance has multicausality, the elements of which may stretch from locking an 'options' person in a 'procedures' environment to expecting an introvert to behave like an extravert or giving somebody a job they are just not trained for. Then the person may have causes that are external to the work environment – relationship problems, money problems, health problems, family responsibility problems – and it might be true to say that any one of these can result in poor performance. Generic descriptors of the performance problems don't help:

'He has poor interpersonal skills', 'Her attitude is all wrong.' So what exactly are the problems here? A systematic approach with the person, having agreed that there is a performance problem, is perhaps the best approach – see 'Performance problem solving', *Coach the Coach*, Issue 14.

Our experience both as managers and as consultants is that, in the main, poor performers know that they are not performing well and usually they are not happy about it. They are also quite prepared to blame a situation or person outside themselves. Sometimes this is valid, but generally the real reason has to be gently prised from them.

A story

Anne was a 19-year-old training administration assistant. She was smart and bright, and, although she was inexperienced, she did well. Then her performance went downhill.

The senior training administrator was asked to look after Anne and help her. She tried her best, but Anne's performance and her distracted attitude, which resulted in her making a number of elementary mistakes, did not improve.

One day Anne walked into the manager's office with a letter of resignation. He sat her down and asked why she was resigning. He faced a blank. He explored and was convinced it was not a departmental problem. So he said he would not accept her resignation until she told him what the problem was.

The following Monday Anne came into the manager's office and was prepared to talk – a little. The manager found out Anne's husband had been made redundant and he was abusing her. Fortunately the manager had some training in performance problem solving. The manager assumed the resignation was a cry for help. He offered to get a professional counsellor involved. Anne refused. Over the next three months the manager coached Anne in handling the domestic situation she faced and supported her at work. Eventually she made the decision that she would have to leave her husband. The manager coached her through the steps and process of resettling her life. (This was a massive learning experience for him.) Now, 20 years on, Anne is still working for the same company, is a highly respected performer and has moved up the hierarchy.

What is the message of this story? Poor performance was a symptom. The primary cause had to be found, and then coaching, sometimes overlapping into counselling, was used.

Ethics

Some of you may have taken a sharp intake of breath at some point in the story. You might have questioned the ethics of a manager becoming involved in coaching that strayed into the territory of the marital relationship. The only answer we can give is the welfare of the person, her needs as she expressed them, and the responsibility the manager felt towards her and the company. The issue is that the client decides the destination, the coach guides to where the client wants to go. Ethics is a quicksand in which coaches, even with the best of intentions, can sink. In this case he did not.

Coaching?

What we have observed in many organisations is the dreaded PIP – performance improvement plan. It seems to work like this. The poor performer is set a series of short-term objectives and told they will be closely monitored. The demoralised poor performer notices that all the actions they take are observed, which creates further pressure. The person does not ask for help because – well, just because – so performance is mediocre and the view of the person as a poor performer is reinforced (a self-fulfilling prophecy). Is this a cynical view of PIPs? Well, perhaps it is. What is very clear is that a PIP works extremely well if the cause of the poor performance is clearly identified, the poor performer is

supported and coached, and their self-esteem is reinforced. Setting objectives and close monitoring is totally insufficient and in most cases inappropriate.

The key elements of curing poor performance

- Identify the specific performance problems. Discuss with the person what job elements are not being met, both in relationship to required outputs and in relationships with others or other intangible factors.
- Explore the matter fully to see if the cause of the poor performance can be established. Treating the symptoms – the observed performance problems – is often a useless exercise. The problem will not go away unless the cause is treated.
- Find a mutually acceptable way of dealing with it. Coaching of observed shortfalls is only one of many solutions. It may be that you have to refer the person to an outside body such as a medical practitioner, a financial adviser or a good divorce lawyer. Even if one of these routes is the agreed route to the solution, the person may still need to be coached and supported in taking the solution through to a level at which the symptoms – the observed poor performance – are eliminated. The buck cannot be passed.
- If coaching is preferred, an ideal solution agreement will still have to be reached on exactly what the person will be coached in and how success will be recognised.