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Difficult Conversations

How to Talk to an Employee Who Isn't Meeting Expectations

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Summary. Approaching a conversation about improving an employee's performance requires preparation, empathy, and a focus on collaboration. Even though hearing the truth about their current performance will be tough and potentially hurtful, it's a teaching moment... [more](#)

As a leadership and team coach, I frequently encounter situations where managers feel ill-equipped to give their team members negative performance feedback. These conversations can be particularly challenging because the stakes are high for both sides. Unfavorable performance reviews and ratings come with tangible consequences for an employee's compensation and career progression. Further, if the negative feedback is a surprise to them, it might prompt them to start looking for a new job.

However, these challenging moments also present opportunities to strengthen the manager-employee relationship. Here's how to treat difficult performance conversations not as fault-finding missions, but instead as opportunities to work collaboratively to define a shared commitment to growth and development.

Set the Stage for Collaboration

When there's misalignment between what you expect of an employee and the work they're delivering, start by defining what success looks like and who will be involved in turning around their performance. This must be a shared goal between you and your employee for them to feel valued and supported. You can

start by stating, “We should have an honest and open dialogue. My goal is to give you clear feedback and ensure we are collectively working toward your development.”

Take a Look Back

During the conversation, take a moment to look back and understand the situation. You can kick this off by asking them to self-reflect and assess their own performance. For example:

Let’s take a moment to understand how we arrived here and what factors influenced our path. I’d like to invite you to self-reflect and assess your own performance. Did you accomplish all your goals and meet the expectations set? Can you share your perspective on what’s working well and what isn’t? Looking back, if you had the opportunity to change or improve anything, what would you do differently and why?

Understand Their Values

Research has shown a strong link between employee engagement and performance improvement. Employees often prioritize purpose, impact, and meaningful work, which influences their sense of engagement and commitment to the organization. Before initiating a conversation about performance improvement, take

the time to understand the employee's values. This helps ground the conversation in personal and professional growth, aligning organizational goals with their individual aspirations.

During the feedback process, also discuss how their current actions and performance connect to their long-term career aspirations. Consider these prompts:

- When you think about your long-term goals, how does your current role contribute to your professional growth?
- Which aspects of your work do you feel align most with your career aspirations, and how can we build on those strengths?
- Could you talk about any experiences or skills you're hoping to gain soon to support your career path?

Give Constructive Feedback

Deliver feedback with clarity and specificity. Provide clear examples, not hypotheticals, to ensure the employee understands exactly how the work they're delivering isn't aligning with what's expected of them. Avoid ambiguity.

Solicit insights from various stakeholders and cross-functional team members in order to provide the employee with a more comprehensive understanding of the situation. Doing so not only

gives the employee a broader spectrum of viewpoints to consider — it demonstrates your commitment to fairness and inclusivity and fosters an environment of openness and transparency.

Moreover, when feedback comes from a collective of voices, it becomes more difficult for the employee to blame you. Instead, it emphasizes that the feedback is a reflection of broader observations and perspectives within the team. The focus shifts from assigning blame toward collaborative problem-solving and growth, as everyone involved is invested in helping them improve. This stakeholder-centered approach empowers the employee to recognize the need for change, take accountability, and assume ownership of their performance improvement.

It's also critical that you leave judgment aside and approach the discussion as an inquiry, acknowledging the emotional aspect of the conversation. For example:

You're meeting your project deliverables, which is fantastic! However, this success appears to come at the expense of your cross-functional relationships. Several team members have expressed concerns about your ability to perform your project management responsibilities. They have had to step in and cover for your missed deadlines by accelerating their work to meet the project delivery. In addition, I've noticed that you seem distracted and aren't engaging as much as you could in virtual meetings. This behavior comes across as disinterested and disrespectful to the rest of the team, and the 360 feedback you've received reflects this perception.

Create the space for a vulnerable conversation, keeping in mind that non-work-related issues might be driving your employee's lackluster performance. It's essential to display empathy and openness. You can do that by sharing a relevant personal experience. For example:

I don't know if you realize I'm an introvert. Large meetings are very draining for me, especially when poorly organized. To self-manage, I architect a well-structured meeting. I prepare a clear agenda and assign sections of it to specific team members. Giving everyone a role in how the meeting runs makes everyone feel involved, sets the expectation that everyone is accountable for coming prepared, and ensures no one dominates the conversation. It also allows me to lead by example: The team sees what a well-run meeting looks like and how they can adapt the structure for their own meetings.

Ask your employee to share their honest opinion about what is leading to this feedback, then sit in silence and give them space to share their thoughts. More often than not, they will take some accountability for their results. If they don't, they may not be coachable.

Give Positive Reinforcement

Now that you've taken the time to look back and assess what's happening, reset the focus to the present state. Set the tone of the conversation by acknowledging the employee's strengths and desire to do well. Emphasizing empathy and understanding will show them that the discussion is about growth and development rather than criticism. You want to communicate that you believe improvement is possible and that you and the team are here to

support them through their self-improvement journey. As Charles Schwab said, “The way to develop the best that is in a person is by appreciation and encouragement.”

Provide an Actionable Path Forward

Consider providing feedback that’s focused on the future and allows you as the manager to ask the employee to imagine “what if.” For example, “How would you handle a situation if...?” This forward-looking reframing of feedback helps remove the stigma of criticism and puts your direct report in a state of mind where they’re able to accomplish a different result; after all, we can’t change the past.

Reset Expectations

Clearly communicate what your expectations are moving forward. Ensure the employee understands the standards and is aligned with the organization’s goals. As author, sales expert, and motivational speaker Zig Ziglar said, “A goal properly set is halfway reached.”

To encourage dialogue, consider asking questions like:

- What specific actions or behaviors do you think are needed to align your performance with the organization’s goals and expectations?

- How can we collaborate to ensure a clear understanding of performance standards going forward?
- How can I support you, and what resources do you require from the organization (such as training, continuous feedback, check-ins, etc.)?

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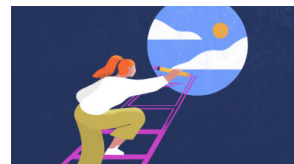
Approaching a conversation about improving an employee's performance requires preparation, empathy, and a focus on collaboration. Creating the space for self-reflection and an understanding that change is possible can help the employee move from feeling victimized to feeling empowered. Even though hearing the truth about their current performance will be tough and potentially hurtful, it's a teaching moment managers must embrace to help them become more resilient and adept at problem-solving and developing professional relationships.

Jenny Fernandez, MBA, is an executive and team coach, Columbia and NYU faculty, and future of work and brand strategist. She works with senior leaders and their teams to become more collaborative, innovative, and resilient. Her work spans Fortune 500 companies, startups, and higher education. Jenny has been recognized by LinkedIn as a "Top Voice in Executive Coaching, Leadership Development,

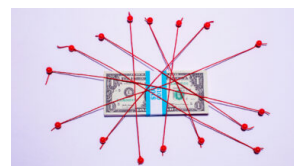
and Personal Branding” and was invited to join the prestigious Marshall Goldsmith’s 100 Coaches community. She is a Gen Z advocate. Connect with her on LinkedIn.

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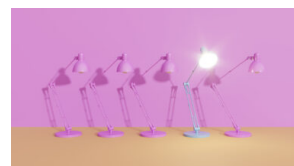
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