

8 Rules for Dealing with Employees Who Are Bringing Your Company Down



There are certain problems that most managers would like to avoid. Calling angry customers, for instance. Presenting unhealthy sales numbers to higher-ups. And yes, dealing with those slow-moving, low-achieving, company-rule-breaking employees known as poor performers. But Joanne Sujansky has a suggestion: take care of the latter problem and the other two might just work themselves out.

“When you confront your poor performers, you will find that one of two things happens,” says Sujansky, founder and president of KEYGroup. “They improve or they move—hopefully to a new company and not another department, that is. Either way—improving or moving out of the company—keeps customers satisfied and business brisk. And it keeps your good employees happy, too.”

Makes sense, right? Of course it does. Unfortunately, says Sujansky, many managers fall down on the job when it’s time to deal with poor performers. Perhaps they don’t want to rock the boat, fearing that poor performers will retaliate with even worse performance. Or perhaps they don’t know how to confront someone professionally. So they do nothing, and everyone suffers.

So how widespread is this head-in-the-sand phenomenon? KEYGroup commissioned a survey that yielded results suggesting that it’s depressingly common. “We found that less than one-third of managers are seen by their employees as doing a good job confronting poor performance,” she notes. “It seems that, in most companies, poor performers are allowed to run rampant.”

The Internet-based survey, carried out by Zoomerang, included questions about leadership and retention practices. The 1,393 men and women who took the survey ranged in age from 25-65 and older, had varying levels of education, and lived all over the United States.

In evaluating the statement My manager confronts poor performance, only 31 percent of respondents agreed that their manager confronts poor performance.

With results like these, it should come as no surprise that poor performers can and do hinder goal achievement resulting in less of everything: sales, revenue and profitability. What's worse, poor performers bring down everyone else in your company. No one wants to work with a person who is unreliable and incapable of correcting his or her mistakes. Companies who tolerate poor performance will see an exodus of high performers who are unhappy working in that environment, resulting in yet another expense—costs for replacing a good employee can often reach the amount of that person's salary.

Clearly, the benefits of putting an end to poor performance in your organization are innumerable. So how do you confront these offenders? Here are Sujansky's tried and true rules of engagement:

Be specific. If an employee has been consistently late, specify the number of times (frequency) or amount of time (intensity). Avoid exaggerated statements, such as You are totally unreliable. Instead, try This is the third time in one week that you have been ten minutes late. If this form of poor performance has been a problem in the past, remind the employee when you have pointed out the offense previously. Say, I indicated to you the day before yesterday that coming in late is not acceptable. "Always, always, always re-focus the employee on the stated goal," says Sujansky. "Otherwise your efforts will be fruitless. Say something like, 'It is important for you to be here at the designated time since customers rely on our immediate responsiveness when they have questions about their order.' You want to stay on track and give clear, focused feedback to your employee."

Focus on the performance required for the job. For example, if you need to correct something like inappropriate casual dress, make sure that you reiterate the guidelines that have been outlined for the workplace—not the personal taste of the individual. "Straying into areas that have nothing to do with workplace performance will result in a loss of credibility with the person you are confronting," says Sujansky. "It is best to stay focused on the employee's job performance and how her performance is affecting the company as a whole."

Consider the needs of the receiver. Everyone handles feedback differently. Some people want it straight while others are sensitive to any kind of feedback that might be construed as negative. With an employee who wants straightforward feedback, you can get away with saying, "You gave the customer the wrong information because you didn't have the updated manual. How do you think we should handle it?" To get through to a more sensitive employee, you will need to take a different approach. For instance, "I understand why you provided the customer with this information. Are you aware that the guidelines have changed? What do you suggest we do in this situation?" Regardless of the poor performer's personality, however, you should always be clear and straightforward in your communication.

Focus on performance over which the receiver has control. Poor performance isn't always the result of an employee's carelessness. Let's say one of your salespeople, Elliott, hasn't reached his goals because he is being hindered by someone else. Don't blame him. Instead, determine the options that he has available to remedy the situation. Discuss how you or Elliott can influence the other department member to better support goal accomplishment.

If, however, an employee hasn't reached his goals because he has not conducted

the required number of activities, work with him to identify things he can do, such as make more follow-up calls or aim for ten appointments a week instead of eight, that will help him to make progress. "Simply telling the employee what was wrong won't help him change his behavior," says Sujansky. "Always take the time to brainstorm ideas on how the employee can improve future performance or avoid the mistake in the future."

Give timely feedback. Usually, there's no reason to hesitate on giving feedback to poor performers. Make the individual aware of what she did immediately so she'll have total recall of what just happened. However, pay close attention to her mental state. It could be that she is too emotional in the moment or too pre-occupied with solving the problem. If either situation is the case, it is probably not a good idea to give corrective feedback at that time. Wait until the employee has calmed down and can really think about what has happened.

Just don't wait days, or worse, weeks, to provide feedback, when the low performer's behavior has become a hazy memory. "A common pitfall is that too many managers do not provide feedback on a regular basis," says Sujansky. "And then they bombard the employee at her end of the year appraisal. The appraisal should be a review of previous discussions throughout the year. Nothing mentioned at that time should come as a surprise to the employee."

Check for understanding. Avoid asking close-ended questions during the discussion or when summarizing. At the end of a confrontation you never want to ask, "Do you understand?" The employee could simply say "Yes," and you will not know if your message actually got through to him. Instead, ask the employee to summarize his understanding of the situation. Have him lay out actions, steps, or accountabilities that should be implemented while moving forward.

Keep a paper trail of your discussions. After each meeting with the poor performer, take notes that summarize the discussions. In your documentation, include the problem, the action taken to correct or eliminate it, the dates, the result that occurred, and any comments that will help you to recall feedback sessions when you are completing your summary of performance at the end of the year appraisal. However, don't include only examples of the employee's poor performance. Also highlight, discuss, and document examples of acceptable or outstanding performance. "Avoid creating a 'little black book' of mistakes and errors," says Sujansky. "Documentation should reflect all levels of performance and feedback discussions, both positive and corrective."

Use the ABC format for giving feedback. Here's how the format breaks down: A is for *accurate*. Be accurate by reflecting an objective description of what occurred. B is for *behavioral*. State the problem in performance terms (what was seen or heard). C is for *consistent*. Be sure to include what was done, the impact, and how it will be eliminated (negative) or repeated (positive) in the future. "Avoid using words like 'always' and 'never,'" says Sujansky. "They are exaggerations and do not usually reflect realistic frequency or intensity of human behavior."

"Confronting poor performers may not be easy now," says Sujansky. "But once they have a system in place for doing so, managers usually find that getting them back on track is far preferable to ignoring the problem. As you begin to deal with poor performers instead of avoiding them, you will discover what makes them tick and you will be able to resolve issues more efficiently. Everyone will

benefit, and your job will get a whole lot easier.”
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About the Author

For more than twenty-five years, Joanne G. Sujansky, Ph.D., CSP, founder of KEYGroup, has been helping leaders to increase business growth and profitability by creating and sustaining what she calls a Vibrant Entrepreneurial Organization. Her expertise, insight, wisdom, humor, and practical solutions have made Joanne a highly sought-after speaker for keynote addresses, seminars, conferences and workshops. She has brought fresh concepts and effective techniques to executives and audiences in over thirty countries around the globe.

Earlier in her career, Joanne held management- and director-level positions across several different industries. She is past national president of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), and is a recipient of its highest honor, the Gordon M. Bliss Award. An active member of the National Speakers Association (NSA), she has received its highest earned designation, Certified Speaking Professional (CSP). Joanne has authored numerous articles and books on leadership, change and retention.[/author]