



U.S. Office of Personnel Management

Addressing and Resolving Poor Performance – A Supervisors Quick Guide

Dealing with performance issues can be a challenge for any supervisor. While one of the toughest, it is also one of the most important parts of a supervisor's job. It is a key supervisory responsibility, and failure to address poor performance can have a greater impact than may be appreciated. Failing to address it sends a clear message to other employees that you have different standards for poor performers and that they don't have to meet set performance expectations.

Poor performance only gets worse over time—rarely does it correct itself without action on the part of the supervisor. Most employees want, and expect, to be held accountable for their work and resent it when others do not “pull their weight.” Building a high performing and productive team begins by setting clear expectations with its individual members and addressing with them any failure to meet those expectations.

Recognize the Signs of Poor Performance

Identifying when an employee's performance is declining is critical to timely intervention.

Signs of Poor Performance

Inconsistent Quality of Work

- Frequent mistakes, or results that don't meet standards.
- Work lacks attention to detail, requiring rework.

Low Productivity

- Missed deadlines or consistently failing to meet performance targets or goals.
- Chronic procrastination, appearing disengaged, or completing tasks with less effort.

Lack of Initiative

- Failing to take on new challenges or showing little interest in improving.
- Rarely offering solutions, not taking ownership of work.

Negative Attitude or Disengagement

- Showing signs of frustration, cynicism, or lack of motivation.
- Constantly complaining, resisting change, or disruptive behavior in team settings.

Consider the Cause of Poor Performance

Before addressing the issue, understanding the potential underlying cause(s) is essential to being prepared for the conversation with your employee and collaborating on an appropriate solution.

Common Causes of Poor Performance

Skill Gaps

- Is the employee struggling because they lack necessary knowledge or abilities?
- Consider whether additional training, mentoring, or resources are needed.

Personal Issues

- External stressors such as family problems, health concerns, or personal struggles can affect performance.
- It's important to show empathy while respecting personal boundaries.

Motivation

- A drop in performance may stem from a lack of recognition, job dissatisfaction, unclear career progression, or unclear understanding for linkages to higher level organizational goals.
- Employees may not feel connected to their work or may not understand the value of their role within the team or broader organization.

Work Environment

- A toxic workplace, unclear job expectations, lack of resources or ineffective leadership could also contribute.
- Unbalanced distribution of work to highest performers.
- Poor team dynamics, lack of trust, or workplace bullying may also cause disengagement.

Approach the Employee with a Constructive Mindset

Address the performance issue promptly, but ensure your approach is both empathetic and professional.

Key Considerations

Timely Intervention

- Don't let poor performance fester. The sooner you address the issue, the better the chances of resolving it. Waiting too long can lead to frustration or escalation.
- Engage your human resources professionals for advice on how to intervene.

Private Conversation

- Always approach the employee privately to discuss performance, avoiding public embarrassment.
- Set up a formal meeting where both of you can focus on the issue(s) without distractions.
- Document your conversations and other attempts to assist the employee.

Stay Objective and Solution-Focused

- Focus on observable behaviors and outcomes, not personal traits. This makes the conversation less emotional and more actionable.
- Use facts and data, rather than assumptions or hearsay. This helps avoid any misunderstandings and keeps the conversation fair.

The Conversation Framework

A structured conversation helps ensure both parties remain calm and focused on resolving the issue.

Conversation Framework

Start with Positive Feedback

- Acknowledge any strengths or positive contributions the employee has made, which helps soften the conversation and reinforces the idea that improvement is possible.
- Example: “I appreciate the effort you put into [task]. You have strong analytical skills, and I know you can excel here.”

Identify the Issue Clearly

- Clearly state the specific performance problem. Use concrete examples and data to describe the behavior or outcomes that are lacking.
- Example: “However, I’ve noticed that the deadlines for your reports have been consistently missed over the past month. For instance, the last two reports were submitted late, affecting the team's ability to meet our targets.”

Listen Actively

- After presenting the issue, ask the employee’s perspective. This ensures they feel heard and respected, and it may reveal underlying causes (e.g., unclear expectations, personal issues).
- Example: “Can you share what you think might be contributing to these delays?”

Offer Support

- Ask what resources or help the employee needs to improve their performance.
- Example: “Is there any specific training or support you feel would help you meet the deadlines?”

Collaborate on a Plan

- Work with the employee to come up with a concrete plan for improvement. The employee should be involved in setting goals to increase accountability and motivation.
- Example: “Let’s set a goal to submit the reports on time for the next month. We’ll also check in after two weeks to see how things are going.”

Create a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP)

When informal conversations don't lead to improvement, a more structured approach is required.

Steps in Developing a PIP

Identify the specific critical performance element(s)

- To initiate a PIP, supervisors must identify the specific critical performance element in the employee's performance plan that the employee is failing.

Set Specific, Measurable Goals

- Each PIP must identify what performance is expected from the employee and how it will be measured.
- Goals should be clear, detailed, and measurable, allowing both you and the employee to track progress.
- Example: "Improve report accuracy by reducing errors by 50% over the next 30 days."

Define the Timeline and Consequences

- A PIP will normally span 30 business days. Ensure the timeframe is realistic to allow improvement while still holding the employee accountable.
- Inform the employee of the PIP period and the possible consequences the employee faces if he or she fails to improve their performance.

Outline Support and Resources

- Designate an individual who will be responsible for helping the employee through the PIP and indicate how often he or she will meet the employee.
- Identify any training, tools, mentoring, or other assistance that will be provided to help the employee succeed.
- Example: "We will schedule weekly check-ins, and I'll arrange for a time management workshop to help you prioritize tasks."

Regular Check-ins and Monitoring

- Schedule regular follow-up meetings to assess progress and adjust the plan if needed.
- Document performance against stated standards and measurements.
- Example: "We will have bi-weekly meetings to discuss progress and troubleshoot any challenges."

Provide Ongoing Feedback

Feedback is crucial during the PIP period to keep employees motivated and on track.

Key Actions for Effective Feedback

Frequent Check-ins

- Check-in regularly (weekly or bi-weekly) to monitor progress, acknowledge improvements, and identify any further obstacles.

Reinforce Positive Behavior

- When the employee makes improvements, recognize these efforts, even small ones. Positive reinforcement encourages continued effort.
- Example: “I noticed you’ve been meeting deadlines recently, and your reports have shown significant improvement. Keep it up!”

Take Corrective Action if Necessary

If there is no improvement at the end of the PIP period, work with your servicing HR specialist on the next steps. This will include considering reassignment, demotion, withholding within-grade increases, or removal of the employee from his or her position and from the Federal service. Where an employee improves his or her performance at the end of the PIP period, he or she must continue to perform above the unacceptable level for at least one year starting from the beginning of the PIP period to avoid further administrative action.

Final Steps: Resolution

At the conclusion of the process, determine whether the employee has shown sufficient improvement or not.

Possible Outcomes

Achieved Improvement

- If the employee successfully meets the performance expectations, recognize their progress and encourage continued development.
- Example: “You’ve done a great job in meeting the new targets. Let’s continue to work on developing your skills for future growth.”

Continual Development

- Even after improvement, encourage the employee to continue setting new development goals.

Administrative Action

- It should not be a surprise to the employee whether he or she successfully completed the PIP.
- If the employee's performance does not improve, you may need to consider separation, demotion, or reassignment. The supervisor should choose the appropriate action that enables them to quickly remove the employee from critical positions and avoids prolonging the employee's tenure in the federal service where he or she does not demonstrate the willingness or capability to improve their performance.

Key Takeaways

- Address performance issues promptly and with empathy.
- Ensure open, honest, and solution-focused communication.
- Set clear, measurable goals and track progress regularly.
- Document every step for transparency and consistency.
- Use corrective actions only after offering support and clear feedback.