

Dealing with the poor performer

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ABSTRACT

Nobody wants to be bad at their job but sometimes it happens. When managing teams this situation will occur and can be one of the most difficult things to resolve. The presence of the virtual world has perhaps made this aspect of managing even harder. This presentation takes a systematic approach to the issue. It is not sufficient to solely identify the problem and say it must be resolved. There are many considerations. We have a duty of care to our staff and a responsibility to the team as a whole. Practical approaches are discussed and backed-up by personal experiences.. Also discussed are references to applicable models including change management, team development, and learning styles. The objective of the presentation is to suggest processes and practical methods for the office.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with processes. Processes are useful in that they give a structure to our thoughts and actions. This is not to say that we should not be concerned with personalities; similarities and differences between persons are important but when situations are dominated by those personalities it can lead to difficulties.

Below are steps or elements in the process; it is not intended to be prescriptive list but to inform your own approach and help you, the reader, develop techniques you are content and confident with.

Key to successful interventions are openness and clarity.

POINT ZERO WHERE DOES IT BEGIN?

“Point zero”: Using this as a label because before we deal with the poor performer we examine ourselves. Some things that we should consider in the beginning:

- Are you part of the the problem here? - is there something you have done / not done? This is not a reason to stop dealing with poor performance but sometimes we have been part of the problem and need to recognise this.
- What are your sources of support? Dealing with the poor performer can be challenging. Are you equipped (initially at least) with what you need (processes, advice, management backup),
- Collect and analyse the relevant data.

Throughout the process we need to remember that people want to do a good job. Unless something is seriously wrong that is. We want people not to dread coming into work, but to enjoy or at least feel successful in what they do. Our role in managing, co-ordinating or whatever is to help them get to a good situation.

ESTABLISHING THE GAP

Establishing the gap is simply stating what the current situation is, what it should be and those things that need to be changed.

Simply stated but perhaps not simple to hear or accept or agree.

This is where the preparation of point zero is important: have we got the evidence of the gap? If not then our “poor performer” may be justified in saying “that’s not a problem / nothing to do with me”.

It is also where our interactions and particularly the language we use is important. Be precise, objective and non-judgemental. Avoid vague descriptions, subjective opinions and needlessly personalising things.

The last of these avoidances might sound contradictory: we are dealing with something that has been done / not done by a person. Surely we have to identify that person at some stage? In most situations the context is already making this clear however. A discussion about – for example – late delivery of a work item could be stated as:

“you delivered package A on 12th September five days late, your lateness caused Team B to miss their deadlines”,

or

“package A was delivered on 12th September, because of this Team B missed their deadline”.

Two things about avoiding the “you”/“your” in the second example:

- it concentrates on the problem – this is what we are trying to solve
- it does not needlessly make the other person more defensive

MODELS OF CHANGE

Problems usually have a direct cause, often the result of some change. Asking why the problem has occurred often involves looking at that change and this can be useful in the next stages of the process.

The Kübler-Ross model (also known as the five stages of grief) has been adapted for organization use and is sometimes presented as this four stage model of Shock, Anger, Acceptance, and Commitment.

- Shock: an initial reaction to change which may include denial as they potentially refuse to accept the new situation.
- Anger: having recognised the new situation an affected person may react negatively. They may feel angry or fearful, and actively resist.
- Acceptance: no longer focussed on what is lost people then start to accept the change and explore what the change means for them (such exploration could be positive or negative in impact)
- Commitment: having accepted the change the person embraces it and makes the necessary changes to their ways of working so becoming more productive and positive.

The model suggests that it is possible to get stuck at any of the first three stages, and so leading to problems.

If the situation you are dealing with involves change and the person appears stuck at one for the shock, anger or acceptance stages then this may offer some clues in how to resolve the situation.

SCENARIO 1: NICKY

Nicky was clever, bright, funny, able to do everything (or so Nicky thought) and eager to help out in all sorts of roles. Nicky had strong ideas about how the organisation should go and was keen to advance these ideas (although strategy and direction was not part of Nicky's role). As the organisation expanded new colleagues began to complain of Nicky's interference with their daily work. Sometimes pieces of work that had been allocated to them would be done by Nicky. In one example a piece of work given to Robin on Friday was done by Nicky over the weekend – in Nicky's own time and before Robin could make a start on it. Nicky told them, “I thought you would be grateful, if you don't like it I won't help you again”. Then a strategy decision taken at a senior level was disagreed with by Nicky who then wrote an all-staff email explaining why they thought it was wrong.

The “gap” here is relatively easy to describe.

Gap 1: new colleagues need to be able to get on with their work without undue interference.

Gap 2: organisation strategy should not be undermined (it's Ok to disagree and take concerns upwards but to spread a message across the organisation is not acceptable)

What perhaps is more difficult is now finding ways to get Nicky to agree that the gap exists and move onto ways to positively impact Nicky's behaviour. Two elements of change analysis may apply here: the change of new colleagues, the change of new strategy. Nicky could be seen as being stuck in Shock regarding new colleagues and Anger in terms of the new strategy.

If, during the "establish the gap" interview, it seems Nicky is stuck in the ways the change model suggests there may be some pathways to explore. For example, has the presence of new colleagues meant Nicky has felt devalued / less useful? Is the new strategic direction really a problem or is strategic planning something that Nicky would like be involved in? We need to find ways of checking this out.

EXPLORING THE GAP

Always expect the unexpected.

We cannot know (and should not attempt) to know everything that is going on in the professional and personal lives of our colleagues. We are therefore going to find out some surprises when trying to find out the reasons the gap exists.

Key to this process is remaining open and non-judgemental. Our aim is firstly to gather information before evaluating the situation and moving to resolutions. This is "exploring the gap". Use open questions, find out why the situation has happened, check out perceptions. This can often lead to identifying things such as clarity in operating procedures, identifying and resolving training needs, facilitating team working practices. There may also be external factors affecting the situation (health, family life and so on). You may need to consult your sources of support for advice as you gain insight into the situation.

MODEL OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Tuckman suggested a model of team development of Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing. The model suggests that teams move through these levels in turn and that reaching "performing" level is the ideal. The model provides a useful checklist of things that might be going wrong in a team and things that might help address the various issues.

At each level below there is a status column describing the situation at each level, also at each level (except for "Performing") there is a column of Actions that help the team progress to the next level.

Level: Forming

Status	Actions for progression
• Lack of clarity of purpose • No commitment to goal and/or team • lack of direction • lack of trust / no relationships • team-working methods not established	• Set goals and identify roles • Communicate with team • Establish team procedures • Bring team together on regular basis • Develop trust between team members

Level: Storming

Status	Actions for progression
• Personal agendas exist • Problem solving doesn't happen • People are anxious • Competition between team members • Lack of team spirit • People try different ideas	• Set expectations with the team • Support positive team behaviour • Create a positive work environment • Identify and celebrate achievements • Develop mutual respect and listening • Develop mutual recognition of roles and skills

• Cliques and splinter groups form	• Develop mutually supportive environment • Feedback is requested, accepted and acted upon
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Level: Norming

Status	Actions for progression
• Trust established and team members appreciate each other • Clear purpose • No hidden agendas • Team members are confident • Creativity is displayed • High motivation • Team is committed to mission	• Praise each other • Share responsibility • Delegate freely within the team • Communicate and keep all members up-to-date • Share success • Commit time to the team • Evaluate their performance and strive to achieve more challenging objectives • Share leadership based upon individual skills sets • Are selective when recruiting new team members • Work to maintain team spirit.

Level: Performing

Status
• Team members are highly motivated • Team needs take precedence over individual objectives • The team is highly effective • Team members display pride in the team • There is a high degree of trust • Team members are supportive of one another • The team achieves outstanding performance

For me this is also a great model to review from time to time to remind me of the things that help a team function well.

SCENARIO 2: SAM

Sam was a senior member of the team who had excellent attention to detail and would find many issues in checking the others work and often point these out in what felt like an abrasive manner; “why did you do this?”, “you did something wrong here”, “well that’s rubbish”. During the absence of the team leader for a prolonged time Sam took on temporary promotion to this role and Sam’s lack of tact became such an issue that the team collectively complained to the line manager. Sam felt that they had been trying their best and was unaware of the tact issue. When the senior manager called Sam in to tell them what had happened Sam was left feeling rather broken.

Describing the “gap” as “do not upset the team” would have been inaccurate but this is how the interview started off (nobody is perfect). In exploring the gap it became apparent that without Sam’s work there would have been serious quality issues. Sam was doing things that nobody else was doing and ensuring a high quality level of deliverables. Sam was performing a vital function for the team.

In further exploring the gap it became apparent that what needed addressing was more complicated. There was an issue regarding how Sam interacted with people and Sam’s personal history was an element here. An interpersonal

skills training course was considered a useful first step towards making things easier. However, of at least equal importance was re-iterating Sam's value to the team. A process was put in place to build the team such that different qualities and skills in individuals would be recognised and valued. The process of dealing with the poor performer led to a new process of team building and improvement.

CLOSING THE GAP

Having established the gap and explored the reasons behind it the next stage is action to close the gap. Sometimes this will involve skills transfer and training and related to this is the final model referenced in this paper.

Expecting staff to absorb all procedures by spending a week reading the Standard Operating Procedure manual is doomed to failure (for at least some people – the author includes themselves in this respect). Acknowledging the people learn in different ways and making learning more accessible will get better results.

The Honey Mumford model suggests that people have different levels of preferences to learning “styles” of Activist, Reflector, Theorist, and Pragmatist. The corollary of this model that having a single learning style available when training people is likely to work well for everyone and that effective learning is characterised by a variety of learning styles being available.

To take the example of reading SOP manuals as an example. Perhaps the reading has to be done at some point but a more effective training could be devised by accompanying this with related activities:

- group discussion of a theme in the SoPs
- getting individuals to present an SOP to the team
- getting real-life feedback of when SOP worked / didn't work
- getting pairs of people to test each other on knowledge

These do not have to be exhaustive or prolonged exercises – the important thing is variety

The learning styles can be briefly described as:

Activists are people who learn by doing things. Their preference is to try out new things. Initially, at least, the consequences are less important than the action.

They have a preference for

- New experiences,
- Going into the unknown,
- Role playing, games and group exercises

They have a low preference for

- Learning on their own
- Receiving information in a prolonged and/or dull manner
- A lot of detail

Reflectors learn by reviewing their experiences. An opinion may only be given after spending some time considering all the available information. They tend to be cautious and thoughtful.

They have a preference for

- Observing,
- Time for consideration and investigation before action,
- Having time to review information

They have a low preference for

- Leading
- Unplanned situations
- Being forced to act quickly

Theorists learn by understanding the theory underlying actions and processes. They appreciate supportive facts, concepts and models. They like situations to be judged objectively.

They have a preference for

- Activities that based on theories and the various supportive aspects of that theory
- Structured situations with an obvious purpose
- Opportunities to examine
- Complexity

They have a low preference for

- Learning through emotions and feelings
- Ambiguity
- Lack of structures, principles and concepts

Pragmatists are keen on trying things out. They look for new ideas that can be applied to the problem in hand. They like to get on with things and tend to be impatient with open-ended discussions; they are practical, down-to earth people.

They have a preference for

- A clear link between the topic and a need;
- Techniques with practical advantages;
- Opportunity to try things out with feedback from an expert;
- Examples that can be copied or emulated

They have a low preference for

- Where is no immediate practical benefit;
- Where are no clear guidelines
- Theoretical situations

It is important to acknowledge that we probably all have a mixture of learning styles and that this mixture varies according to situation. The key message to take from this is that when delivering training that the training styles should be mixed accordingly.

SCENARIO 3: JEZ

Jez was transferred into the team from another area and doing a routine and not particularly difficult task. Initially they were enthusiastic and managing the workload well but after a couple of months their time-keeping became an issue (arriving after / leaving before core hours), as well as having long and hushed conversations on the phone and being loud and disruptive. Their throughput started to fall off and there were some instances of leaving work for others to do because "... I have to leave now".

In establishing the gap Jez disclosed some personal issues affecting their concentration and time keeping – but said that this was coming to an end and that things would improve. They also said that the work was too menial and wanted more challenging tasks.

After the situation improved Jez was offered some new work that involved being trained. Unfortunately on the completion of the training the previous problems recurred plus the new work was not being done to a satisfactory level. A further gap interview became emotional and difficult. Jez's supervisor decided to pause and resume the interview a few days later with the addition of a support person for Jez.

In the resumed interview Jez revealed that a) Jez had difficulty in the office due to psychological factors and, b) the training had not been successful. It was decided that Jez should not continue – for now - with the new work but go back to the more routine task. Once the work situation was improved then the training could be re-done (and in a different manner). The personnel department were also contacted in order to provide suitable advice and support to Jez in relation to the psychological issues. Additionally the personnel department provided support to Jez's supervisor in terms of understanding the situation and a framework for future interactions.

This is an illustration of how we may have to deal with unexpected situations and react flexibly. Sources of support are key in such situations.

CONCLUSION

This paper suggests ways in which dealing with the poor performer can be addressed. Partially this is through the process of identifying, exploring, and later closing the gap

Problems rarely happen in isolation and often the resolution process will benefit from actions based on a systematic appreciation of the situation. For this reason, alongside the "gap" process there are three related models covered. The models are concerned with change, team development, and learning styles. These particular models have been useful to the author in terms of effective processes for dealing with issues arising from working with people.

Readers of this paper are encouraged to use the models as guidance but to remain flexible in their approach as there can be many different reasons for poor performance.

REFERENCES

Kuebler-Ross Model: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_stages_of_grief

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