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The careerist: Managing an underperformer

By Rhymer Rigby

Underperforming underlings represent a huge challenge for any manager. Not only are they very difficult, but their poor performance can rub off on you. What do I look out for?

“The first thing to do is to trust your instincts as a boss,” says Virginia Merritt, a partner at strategy consultants Stanton Marris. “You notice very early on when someone isn’t performing at their best. But it is very easy to rationalise, make excuses and hope that by ignoring a problem it will go away.”

However, she adds: “You need to call it out as soon as you know it’s happening and sound a warning bell that it’s not acceptable.”

How do I understand the underperformance?

“There’s a big difference between underperformers who always underperform and those who have only just started underperforming,” says Octavius Black, founder of performance consultancy The Mind Gym. “If they have performed well in the past you need to ask: ‘What’s wrong now?’ Find the issue and ringfence it.”

Alan Redman, a director at business psychologists Criterion Partnership, says: “Try to understand the causes of the underperformance. They might be things outside of work, they might be personality-based, the person might be overwhelmed by the job or it could be their motivation or values.”

How do I turn it round?

“Engage with the person,” says Mr Redman. “Be open, honest and frank. Build on their strengths and stress the positives. Try and have solution-focused discussions. Ask questions in a way that forces the person to accept that change can happen.”

Mr Black says that they may not be able to see the upsides. “Give them a carrot. Maybe they can’t see the benefit of what they bring. Explore it with them. There’s every reason to believe the situation can be turned around.”

If somebody is a constant underperformer, he says, you may need to show what good performance looks like as they might not know. “Break it down for them. Give them granular goals. Agree what success looks like.”

How do I ensure the turnaround continues?

“Don’t just agree performance goals verbally; write them down for people and say we’ll review these in X months,” says Ms Merritt. “Tell the individual you need to hear about the improvement from other people too. They need to realise colleagues notice and judge.”

However, Mr Redman adds: “Be honest with yourself. Some people cannot make a success of the role they’re in.”

How do I ensure poor performance doesn’t rub off on me?

“I’d go to my own manager and say: ‘This is a problem I have.’ Ask them for advice,” says Mr Black. “That way they know and they feel good because you’re asking them for help.”

He adds that poor performance must be dealt with. “The mistake many people make is they don’t have those tough conversations. If you let people be a bit crap, it’s contagious. You get social loafing. If one person underperforms, other people often do too.”

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