

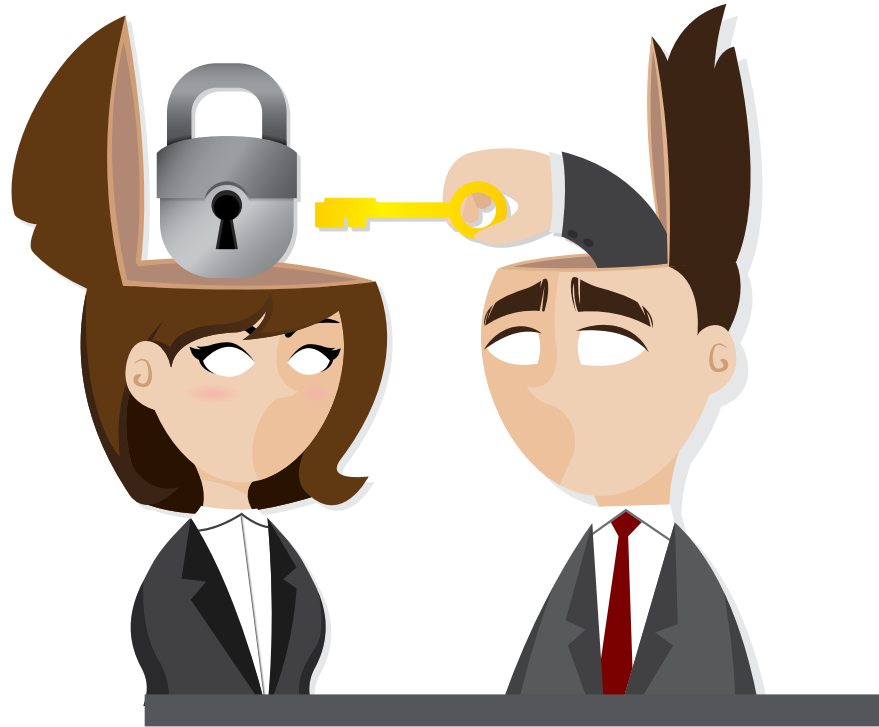
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Solving the Problem OF THE Underperforming Employee

by Rebecca Boartfield and Tim Twigg



"I hate to terminate employees!"

That's the understatement of the year; no one likes to do it. Not only is the termination itself difficult, you will have to recruit, interview, hire, and train a replacement, costing an emotional and financial toll. Plus, what if the person you hire turns out to be worse than the one you fired?

These stresses and/or fears can lead to management paralysis, meaning you put up with the poor performing employee for much longer than you should. Too many employers allow themselves to be held hostage by underperforming employees. And who wins? Nobody! Not you, not the employee, not your practice, and not your other good employees.

To figure out what's causing the performance issue, and to fix it, you first must understand what is contributing to the problem.

THE FIRST QUESTION:

Is it the employee or is it me?

The easy answer is always "the employee," but is that really true? The morale of your people often reflects your attitude. If you are unhappy, chances are they will be unhappy too. If you project a positive mental outlook,

they are likely to respond the same way. As any good leader would do, be willing to take a hard look at your role. Don't assume it is always your employee who is causing the problem.

THE SECOND QUESTION:

Why?

What is contributing to the poor performance or poor attitude (especially if the employee had a great attitude before)? Ideally, this would include having a conversation with the employee to focus on solutions for improvement. What if the solution is as simple as the need for training? To be clear, this is about being open to knowing what's truly going on and looking for constructive ways to move forward with a game plan solidly in place. In your conversation, listen for points of frustration, noting especially ways the employee reports s/he could be more adequately supported.

THE THIRD QUESTION:

Is this employee worth keeping?

This may be the most important question of all. Why bother trying to solve the problem if, in your gut, you don't want the person to stick around any longer?

Performance is a function of both ability and attitude. Ability is the person's own aptitude brought to the practice and is enhanced by the training and resources supplied by the organization. Attitude is a broad term and means different things to different people. When performance is poor as a result of attitude, it is usually the product of a person's lack of desire and commitment, both of which can be reflected in the person's overall motivation.

You can have someone with a great attitude who lacks ability; you can have someone with a bad attitude and great ability; and you can have someone who is perfectly balanced between the two.

Obviously, everyone wants the perfectly balanced employee. Which of the other two do you think creates the most problems? Without a doubt, it is the individual with the bad attitude, regardless of ability. With the right attitude, an employee who lacks ability has the potential to be trained and succeed. A bad attitude, on the other hand, may never be fixed, regardless of anyone's efforts.

People with low ability and/or poor attitude may have been poorly matched with the job in the first place. They may have been promoted to a position that's too demanding for them. Or maybe they no longer have the support that previously helped them to perform well. Whatever the reason, the individual either is not getting the job done or is getting the job done but with an unpleasant, disruptive attitude.

THERE ARE FOUR MAIN WAYS TO OVERCOME PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH A LACK OF ABILITY AND/OR POOR ATTITUDE:

Train/support

Focus on the resources provided to do the job. Does the employee have what s/he needs to perform well and meet expectations? Ask the employee for thoughts, ideas, and/or suggestions that will bring about improvement.

The result should be a well designed plan for going forward. It should begin with clarification of performance goals and/or expectations for improvement. It should then outline specific action items for performance assistance (based on what you learned from the employee) and potential solutions to bring about improvements such as resources and/or training. Finally, it should include a process for giving performance feedback so that everyone knows if this is working or not. Your feedback, as always, should be ongoing, timely, accurate, open/honest (not accusatory), and directly related to established goals.

Change job duties

Consider changing job duties where appropriate. Analyze the individual components of the work. Where is the individual specifically failing? Is this something that has to be done by this individual alone? Does it make sense to change a process or procedure to fit the individual in the position? Try different combinations of tasks in order to best match them to the individual's abilities.

This may involve rearranging the jobs of other people if it makes sense for other employees to take on those tasks. Be careful not to unload a bunch of work and then dump it on other team members just to avoid actively dealing with the poor performer. Your higher achieving employees will not take this well if they don't see something being done with the poor performer at the same time.

Your goal is to improve the poor performer and retain the employee, but you should not do this at the expense of other team members. These job duty changes should meet operational needs as well as provide meaningful and rewarding work to everyone involved.

Reassign

When changing job duties doesn't turn the situation around, consider reassigning the poor performer. If you use this option, make sure the reassigned job is still challenging and stimulating. This is not intended to be a punishment and it doesn't have to be a demotion; it could be a lateral move. In fact, it is recommended you don't use demotion as a punishment tactic within your organization. Remember, the employee's performance may not be intentionally poor; s/he may simply lack the skills for the position.

The idea behind reassignment should be a positive one. In a real sense, you can tell the employee that s/he is being reassigned in order to focus on what s/he does well, which is greatly appreciated and valued.

Termination

As a final option, you may need to let the employee go. It really should be a last resort after you've done due diligence to salvage the relationship and make it successful.

Sometimes training and support aren't enough to bring about change; sometimes there aren't appropriate opportunities for changing job duties or providing reassignment; and sometimes an employee's attitude never changes. In these cases, the best solution for everyone involved is for the employee to find work elsewhere.

Don't fall into the trap of being paralyzed by how to handle an underperforming employee. Through careful analysis of the problem, you may uncover a solution. Who knows? It might even bring about a change in you! By creating action plans and looking for ways to solve an abilities or attitude problem, you might create a lasting employee/ employer relationship that will be rewarding for everyone for many years to come. In any case, don't avoid your responsibilities as an employer to act on these problems and to bring about change within your organization, even if that means eventual termination. You can't afford to bury your head in the sand and hope for the best.



Tim Twigg is the President and **Rebecca Boartfield** is an HR Compliance Consultant for Bent Ericksen & Associates. For more than thirty years, the company has been a leading authority in human resources and personnel issues, helping

dentists successfully deal with the ever-changing and complex labor laws.

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FUN! Fact

Children begin to **develop their primary teeth** **six weeks after conception** while in their mother's womb.

One in every 2,000 babies is **born with a tooth.**

Quote-Worthy

“ Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work. ”

— Thomas Edison