How to Turn Around Problem Performance in Five Questions or Less

Jim Bolton

Underperformers suck.

They suck the productivity out of a team or organization. They suck the morale out of your high performers. And according to a 2004 survey[1], if you're a manager, they suck 27% of your time and attention away from other priorities. In that survey, managers reported spending 13% of their time dealing with underperformers and another 14% correcting errors and completing unfinished work. Cumulatively that's about 60 days a year that a typical manager devotes to cleaning up underperformance.

That begs a question that is central to this manifesto: What are underperformers costing you? How much time do you spend reacting to problems related to underperformance? Think of the things you could do with that time if you could only get it back.

There's the bait, now here's the switch. It's easy to condemn underperformers for stealing your time and contributing to the ills listed above, and they do own their share of the blame. But here's the hard truth: you do too. As a manager your job is to enable your people to achieve their performance goals. If they're not, then you're underperforming in this critical area of your job. It's not really your fault that you're in this situation; managers aren't often taught how to address performance problems in people. But that's no excuse to let the status quo ride. You're doing a disservice to yourself, your team, and even the underperformer by not taking action.

The purpose of this manifesto is give you the tools to manage underperformance so that you can both strengthen your team and invest your time in more productive and engaging ways. By answering no more than five yes-or-no questions, you'll be able to quickly diagnose the causes of most performance issues and determine how best to address them.

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1 The Future Foundation, 2004 "Getting the Edge in the New People Economy", London. p. 31.

Before diving in, I would encourage you to review the next section on the sources of underperformance so that you understand the causes that give rise to it. But, if you want to get right to the questions, jump ahead to page 5.

Sources of Underperformance

One of the reasons that underperformance is so challenging for managers to deal with is that they don't expect it. They usually expect that things will go right and that no news is good news. Yet the Law of Entropy reminds us that virtually everything is in a state of constant deterioration. Rather than expecting that things will go well, smart managers know there are bound to be problems in the performance chain.

Here are some places to look:

↘ **The performance target isn't clear.** Managers often assume that the employee knows what success looks like and why it's important. Unless you make those expectations explicit, the employee may not have the same understanding. Expectations change as business goals change, but rarely are employees' goals updated. Employees often have competing priorities; they're making judgment calls every day about what takes priority. Managers often leave loopholes in agreements, setting a deadline for "next week" without defining specifically when next week they expect completion. The more ambiguous the goal, the harder it becomes for the employee to succeed.

↘ **The person doesn't know how to hit the target.** This is often an issue for people new to a role. Employees can't be effective without proper guidance and development. Underperformance may also be situational: the employee may be talented in other areas but their skills don't transfer to a given task. That leaves employees ill equipped to handle unforeseen obstacles.

↘ **The person is capable but doesn't perform on a consistent basis.** This is the problem that drives managers crazy. The person can do it, has done it, but doesn't do it all the time. It may be something as simple as turning in expense reports on schedule, or it may be a chronic performance issue that others have found workarounds to get around. You may assume this type of underperformance is intentional. Before you know it, you've decided the person is a slacker who just doesn't care, or worse, is out to undermine you. That may be the case, but unless you follow up it's equally possible that employees think (a) that their performance is okay, or (b) that underperformance in this particular area is acceptable. It may sound strange, but if you set a priority and don't check in on it, your people begin to wonder if it really is a priority after all.

↘ **The person is unable to do what's required to hit the target.** There are cases where people aren't capable of doing a job at an acceptable level. There are two primary reasons for this: first, the person was a bad hire to begin with—that is, their strengths don't match the requirements of the job. Second, the job requirements may change. Not everyone has the capacity to adapt in the direction of that change. Someone hired as an underwriter suddenly needs the skills to become a financial consultant. Or a customer service representative learns that she will now be rated on the number of sales referrals she makes. Perhaps a shop floor supervisor in a manufacturing plant must suddenly become a team leader. The skills that made a person successful in one job don't necessarily define success in other performance areas. Sometimes new skills can be developed, other times they can't.

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Other issues—including personal issues—can get in the way of acceptable performance. Problems at home or within the dynamics of a given work team can contribute to an employee's underperformance. If your goal is to get performance back on track, you may need to explore these as well.

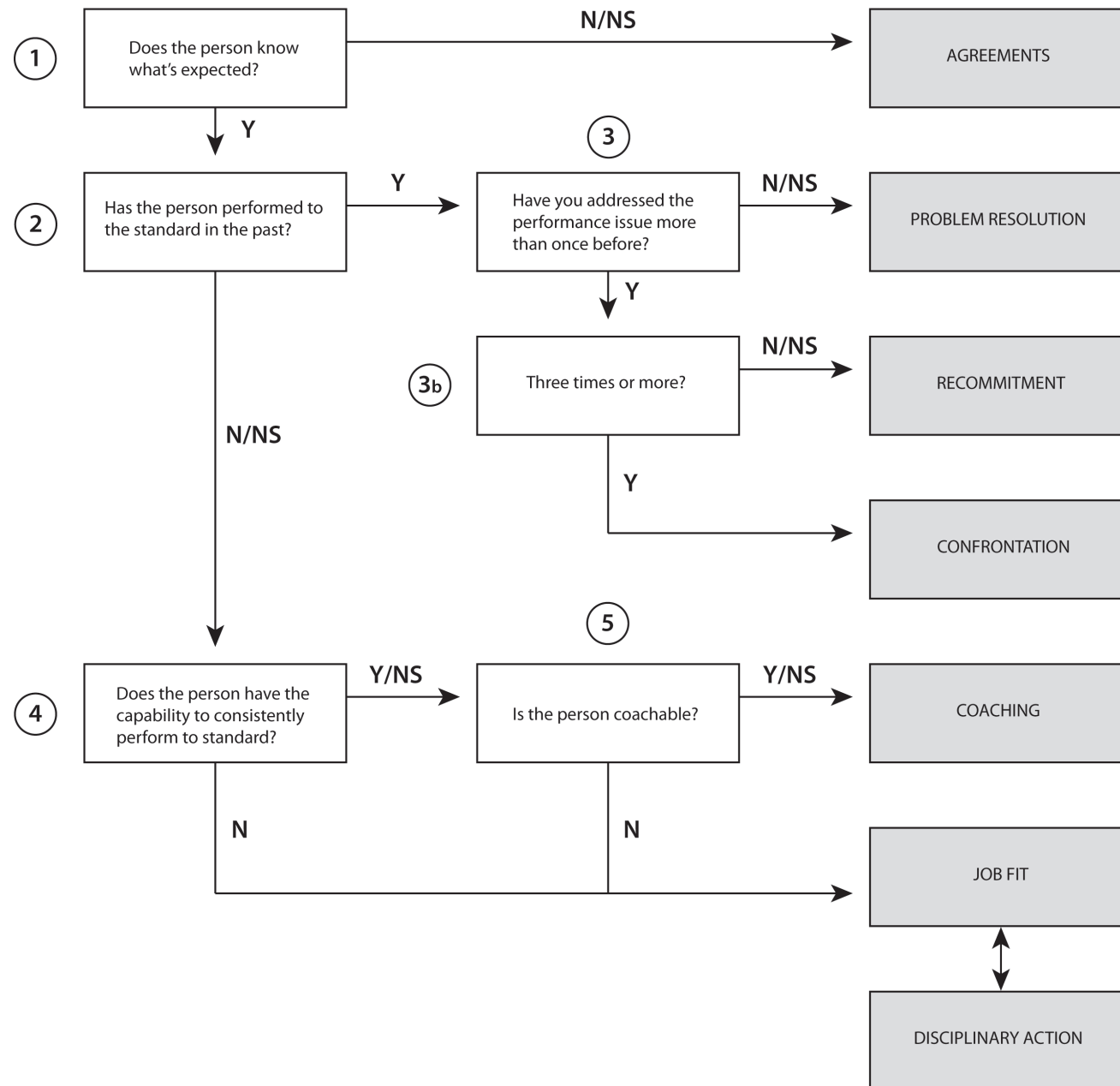# Five Questions To Improved Performance

The good news is that you don't need to live with the problem performance that has plagued you in the past. The following series of five yes-or-no questions—derived from the sources of underperformance reviewed above—can help you manage future performance in a new way. Your answers will steer you toward a turnaround conversation appropriate to the situation and the underperformer. Once you become familiar with the questions you'll be able to assess which conversation is needed in a matter of minutes. You'll be on your way to managing underperformance instead of living with its effects.

Ask yourself:

1 Does the person know what's expected?

2 Has the person performed to standard in the past?

3 Have you already addressed the performance problem more than once?

4 Does the person have the capability of performing to standard?

5 Is the person coachable?

Assuming you have the information you need to make an unbiased judgment, the way you answer these questions can help you determine how best to approach your turnaround process. The chart on the following page shows how that process flows:

As the model illustrates, the questions help you select the appropriate approach for turning around problem performance. For each question, there are three possible responses: yes, no, or not sure. These responses correspond with the Y's, N's, and NS's on the chart. If you're truly not sure—meaning you can't definitively answer yes or no— give employees the benefit of the doubt (the NS's on the chart track that path). If you treat the employees with respect, the more receptive they're likely to be. Shooting first and asking questions later makes the turnaround more of a challenge for everyone.

1 Does the person know what's expected?
— N/NS → **AGREEMENTS**
↓ Y

2 Has the person performed to the standard in the past?
— Y → **3** Have you addressed the performance issue more than once before?
— N/NS → **PROBLEM RESOLUTION**
↓ Y

3b Three times or more?
— N/NS → **RECOMMITMENT**
↓ Y
→ **CONFRONTATION**

2 ↓ N/NS

4 Does the person have the capability to consistently perform to standard?
— Y/NS → **5** Is the person coachable?
— Y/NS → **COACHING**
↓ N
→ **JOB FIT**

5 ↓ N
→ **JOB FIT** ↕ **DISCIPLINARY ACTION**

Does the person know what's expected?

Before you assume that expectations are clear, think it through. Maybe your underperformer should know what's expected, but what seems crystal clear to you may not be clear at all to the other person. Targets are vague; things change; loopholes are left open. The expectation gap may be wider than you think.

A performance agreement is your first step in turning things around when expectations aren't mutually shared or understood. Before moving on to the next question, it will serve you well to make an explicit agreement out of what has been implicit. Confirm your expectations, make the details clear and specific, and put them in writing.

Has the person performed to standard in the past?

The question of performance standards is critical to understanding the direction of your turnaround efforts. It's a fork in the road: if the answer is no, you can skip to question number four regarding capability. If your answer is yes, that means they're capable of doing it, they have done it, and they aren't doing it now. Assuming they know what performance is expected, the next question naturally follows.

Have you already addressed the performance problem more than once?

Whether the performance problem is a recurring one will determine the tone of the turnaround conversation you'll choose. You've got three options here:

1 Problem Resolution: If the answer is no, your path is toward problem solving. Listen particularly for obstacles that might be blocking performance. Do they have the resources they need to be effective? Are competing priorities creating confusion? If possible, help the performer solve the problem rather than giving him or her your right answer. Be a sounding board, direct them toward better options, but don't do it for them. They'll be more committed to their plans than they will be to yours.

2 Recommitment: If you've addressed the issue once or twice already, the person's commitment might need to be shored up; a recommitment discussion is in order. As with the problem solving conversation, start as a listener: ask the person what's getting in the way of keeping the agreement on track. Problem solve as necessary, and make sure they hear a good WIIFM (What's In It For Me) or two before you wrap up.

3 Confrontation: If the person can do and has done the task, and you've addressed it more than three times, then you have a significant performance issue that requires a more difficult confrontation conversation. If you do a good job getting up-front agreements, discussing and resolving issues before they become problems, and following-up regularly to make sure the person's performance and commitment are where you need them to be, these conversations will be rare. Still, there are times when you'll need to confront members of your team about broken agreements.

The reason for this "three strike" approach is that performance change can be bumpy. People need to recast their habits, which is not always easy to do. Even if people are on board with a change, they often stumble before establishing a new rhythm. This approach holds them accountable to the agreement while still giving them the benefit of the doubt.

The goal of a confrontation discussion is not to punish the other person, but to get the original performance agreement back on track. It is a hard conversation: you're holding the other person accountable for not following through, and, human nature being what it is, people don't like being held accountable. It's threatening to the person on the receiving end. To keep this conversation productive, you've got to do two things well: manage the other person's defensiveness, and manage your own. This can be a challenge early in the conversation, but if you stay on-message and don't get hooked, others will eventually realize that you're not out to get them—you're out to get the performance they'd agreed to in the first place.

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Assuming you reach a common and satisfactory understanding about how the other person will achieve his or her performance goals, then you're back to the beginning of the process. If the person's performance continues to suffer and you determine that the person isn't coachable (see below), then you need to consider the person's fit in the role or initiate disciplinary action. Either way, you've done what you can to turn the person's performance around. But you can't make people change if they don't want to.

Which brings us to the last two questions.

Does the person have the capability of performing to standard?

If you've been dealing with underperformance and the person hasn't yet performed to standard, you've got to ask: can the person do the job or this part of it? You hope the answer is yes: if he/she is capable, coaching may be the answer. But if your response is no, you must look at a difficult truth. If you can separate the task and assign it to someone else, this is the time to do that. If it's a bigger issue or you can't reassign the task, you have a job fit problem: the person doesn't have the skill, ability—or perhaps the aptitude—needed to do the job. While it's difficult to tell a person that he or she is in the wrong job, it doesn't serve you, the underperformer, or your team to allow the situation to continue. And it only gets more difficult if you let the situation drag on.

Is the person coachable?

Assuming you have determined that the person is capable of doing the job, the final question assesses coachability. Generally, coachability involves two ingredients: a willingness to participate in the learning process and a commitment to apply and refine what has been learned. If the person is coachable, there is room for improvement in his or her performance. A coaching conversation can get that process started. But if the person isn't open to learning or is unwilling to change the behavior, your options are limited. You're back to the job fit conversation or disciplinary action, depending on the circumstances.

Most people will respond positively to this turnaround process, but it won't work with everyone. If you've given the performer a legitimate chance to change and you're still not getting the performance you need, it's appropriate to initiate your company's disciplinary action process.

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Three Bonus Questions For You

Now that you know what direction your performance turnaround will take, asking three bonus questions will determine your willingness and readiness to take action. These questions will make sure you're committed to the underperformer's success. If you're not invested in that person's success, if you're just going through the motions or don't have the time to do the process justice, the turnaround will fail.

The three questions are:

1 Are you willing to give the person a chance to change?

2 Are you willing to manage the person differently?

3 Do you have enough information to act?

Are you willing to give the person a legitimate chance to change?

If the performance problem is new or out of character, giving that person a chance to change may be a fairly easy decision. It gets tougher—and your tolerance wears thin—if you've been living with the problem for a while or if you've addressed it previously. You want to see change happen, and fast.

People don't always change in a straight line. You can change your mind in an instant, but it takes a while for your habits to catch up. If you've ever tried to lose weight or keep your New Year's resolutions you understand the difficulties: behavior change is made up of hard work, trial and error, and self-doubt (especially when evidence of success lags).

To answer Yes to this question, you must be willing to give the underperformer room to improve in an uneven way. If what you're really feeling is that you've had enough, that one more misstep will be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, then you may already be in No territory. If that's where you find yourself, don't try to talk yourself out of it. You're better off acknowledging it and honestly address the impasse.

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but it takes a while for your habits to catch up.

Are you willing to manage the person differently?

Einstein once noted that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. What you've been doing to manage this person's performance hasn't been working. Using the turnaround conversations to directly address performance issues is a great start, but follow-up is essential to sustain performance gains. It doesn't have to take a lot of time, but it does require significant attention and perseverance.

Scheduling regular one-to-one status updates—even brief ones—can provide structure to keep you both on track. But if you don't change the way you manage, you may lose the ground you gained in the turnaround conversations.

Do you have enough information to act?

Is your perception of the performance problem based on objective data or your personal perceptions? If you're not sure if there is a problem, or if you can't define the problem, a problem resolution meeting can help you gather information to aid problem solving. If a confrontation meeting is in order, you'll need more solid data: performance specifics are at the heart of your argument for change. Whatever the case, the goal is to collect enough information to guide the turnaround process, and when possible, help the underperformer see the need for change. A little data can go a long way toward getting performance and commitment on the right track. It's a worthwhile investment.

Conclusion

Performance change is a collaborative venture; to turn around the performance of someone else, you'll also need to change the way you manage that person. The questions posed in this manifesto will help you assess your willingness to engage in that change process and if you do, to find the appropriate starting point.

While you'll need to do some heavy lifting to overcome the performance patterns of the past, the rewards are worth it. Your team will be more motivated knowing that everyone is accountable. You will have helped someone who was failing be more effective and demonstrate more of his or her capabilities. You will have a system for keeping performance on track, which can win you back a big chunk of your time. You may also sleep better at night, not reliving the problems of the past.

Everybody wins. You most of all. ⬚

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim Bolton is the President of Ridge Training, a firm that helps employees communicate productively so they save more time, get more done, and have more fun. As a consultant, trainer, and executive coach who works with clients to make skillful communication a competitive advantage and an evangelist for productive communication, Jim has presented at national conferences, and has been quoted in numerous business publications including *Executive Excellence* and the *Harvard Management Update*. His favorite personal conversations include a private meeting with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the ongoing coaching from his first- and fourth-grade daughters who regularly remind him that he still has a lot to learn about the practice of great communication.

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