

# Asking the Right Questions Can Help You Analyze and Resolve Performance Problems



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With the challenges team leaders face from budget crunches to delivering quality services on time, an added frustration over employee performance problems can often seem to “be the straw that breaks the camels back.”

As a supervisor or manager, you could easily say that dealing with this type of problem is something you will never get used to. However, while that may be true, it doesn’t mean that you can’t increase your level of confidence – and comfort – in knowing how to handle employee performance problems when or if they occur.

So how can you do it? A good place to begin is to avoid one of the biggest mistakes anyone can make – rushing in to try and solve the problem without first determining the cause. Analyzing the problem isn’t always easy, but you can get to the root cause of the problem and on the road to problem solving by focusing on the following questions.

## 1. Is it really a problem?

Employee performance issues should relate to how something the employee is or is not doing impacts their performance and the team’s performance. You need to ask yourself if what the employee is doing is really wrong, or just not the way you would do it? If asking the employee to change something he or she is doing won’t really change the bottom line, you need to consider if it’s really a problem at all – and worth your time when you have so many other issues to deal with.

## 2. Does the employee know what is expected?

When it comes to performance expectations, it’s easy to assume that everyone should know his or her job. After all, how could anyone come to work everyday and not know what is expected? Unfortunately, it’s not that simple. Employees don’t soak up their expectations by osmosis and there is a big difference between “should know” and “does know.” Most employees want to do well. They just need to know what “well” means. As the supervisor or manager, you need to clearly communicate your expectations – in person and in writing.

To help your employees repeat positive actions and change negative ones, you must be willing to supply the feedback they need. For the best chance at

success, feedback must be:

- Immediate and ongoing
- Specific (with examples to illustrate what you mean)
- Limited to only a few key points so that the employee can remember and act on them
- Understood by the employee – even if he or she disagrees with it
- Results oriented – explaining exactly what needs to be done and by when
- Focused on specific behavior, not the person

If you don’t have an up-to-date performance management plan for each of your employees, find the time (no matter how difficult) to get them done. While the thought of doing this may evoke moans and groans from both you and your employees, you’ll both be glad you have a framework of expectations on paper to provide direction throughout the year and refer back to when or if a misunderstanding arises.

## 3. Are the right resources aligned to the needs of the employee?

Sometimes the employee just needs the proper tools to do the job. Suppose for example that you have an employee who never seems to get the phone number correct for return calls. Upon observing the employee doing the job, you notice that he or she is so intent on writing down the message that the phone number just gets “lost in the shuffle.” You determine that a quick solution may be to supply the employee with a telephone that has Caller I. D. When the phone rings, the employee automatically looks at the display and immediately writes down the number. If this seems too simple, just remember the old saying: *the simplest answer is usually the right answer*. At the very least, it’s a good place to start.

## 4. What happens when a job is or is not done correctly?

When something doesn’t go according to plan and deadlines are approaching, it’s a supervisor’s natural reaction to find the quickest route to the finish line. Action is taken, the crisis is averted and everyone moves on to the next emergency of the day. Unfortunately, in the haste to just get “it” done, it’s easy to lose site of the fact that you may have taken an assigned task away from

## Asking the Right Questions - continued

an employee who for one reason or another, just didn't get it done. If you don't follow-up to find out why the task wasn't completed – or take steps to ensure that it doesn't happen again – the employee may conclude that when he or she is faced with another project they don't know how to do, or can't get done, their best course of action is to simply say and do nothing. When the project is due and the work isn't done, you will just give it to another team member and all will be forgotten. If it happens that way, you will have proved the employee right. Remember the old adage: If it happens once, shame on you. If it happens twice, shame on me."

Sometimes, the opposite is true when negative consequences result from a job done well. For example, a manager might say, "since you've done such a great job, I'm going to let you take a crack at this too." Unless the employee is truly interested in added responsibility, performing well has no payoff and he or she may be less motivated to put their best effort into any project in the future.

### 5. Does the employee have an "attitude" problem?

So-called attitude problems are probably the most difficult to resolve. Calvin Coolidge once said: "Few people are lacking in capacity, but they fail because they are lacking in application." It is believed that W.C. Fields amassed considerable wealth during his lifetime. He attempted to keep it a secret by tucking money away under assumed names in an estimated 200 bank accounts around the world. At the time of his death, the executors of his estate located only 45 of the accounts, leaving an estimated \$600,000 unaccounted for. Imagine what those assets, still hidden, are worth today. Just like W.C. Fields' bank accounts, many employees have the talent they need to get the job done, and for some reason have decided to tuck their desire to do more away for a rainy day. As the supervisor, you need to communicate to the employee just how stormy the situation has become and help the employee find the motivation to open their umbrella.

Tell the employee why his or her resistance to do the job to the fullest is a problem and ask the employee for a response to what you said. Listen carefully to try to uncover the source of the resistance and, if possible, work with the employee to identify a solution.

### 6. Could the employee do the job before?

If the employee is new to the job, or has never been able to perform the task in question, then training or some form of mentoring may be in order. Too often, circumstances place employees into a new job or responsibility with little or no training. This is often true of employees who are promoted into managerial or supervisory positions without any assistance in acquiring the skills necessary to do the job.

If, as a supervisor or manager, this happened to you, imagine how difficult it is for any employee in a similar situation. If the employee could do the job before but performance has declined, there may be a number of factors at play:

- He or she may not have had enough time or practice to learn how to do the job correctly.
- Too much time may have elapsed since the employee last performed the task and he or she has now forgotten how to do it, or
- There may be another cause such as an increase in stress either at work or at home.

Take the time to determine the source of the problem before immediately jumping to a solution.

### 7. Does the employee have a problem with other team members – or even you?

Don't underestimate the effect of professional relationships on an employee's performance. Gossip, infighting and verbal abuse can have a huge impact on anyone's ability to do his or her work effectively. These kinds of problems need to be addressed openly and quickly.

Be careful not to be the kind of manager who brushes aside conflict hoping that everyone will just "shape up." As unpleasant as it may seem, your involvement might be necessary to overcome the challenges often faced by people when working together.

### Conclusions:

The questions in this article show that how you resolve a problem will depend in large part on its cause. For example, if the employee doesn't have the proper equipment, providing it to him or her will, in most circumstances resolve the problem. Other problems may require training and goal setting.

Sometimes you will find that there are several solutions to a given problem. The solution you choose will depend on a number of factors such as cost, simplicity, employee preference and ability, effect on other co-workers and even the political implications.

While this article has largely focused on analyzing the problem and very little on resolving it, the same should be true of your approach to handling the problem. If you take the time to carefully analyze the cause of the problem, the solution will often be obvious and hopefully, even simple.

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