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Speaking and coaching internationally on management, marketing and profitability



Management tool #B-21: ©

14 possible reasons for our staff not performing...and whose fault are they?

Every business is the sum total of the performance of all the people in it. Regardless of the size and nature of our business, to prosper we must achieve world-class performance, individually and collectively. We must create and effectively communicate clear expectations and standards of performance and behavior. Then, we must create a culture of commitment, urgency and accountability. Finally, we must measure performance to determine where we must improve...and who must improve.

Failure to deal with non-performance is one of the biggest challenges in many businesses today. There are several reasons for our employees not performing...and, surprisingly, most of those reasons are *not* their fault. In fact, in the majority of cases we, as bosses, have set them up to fail. We're the ones who must improve. Sorry...but it's true.

Check out the 14 possible reasons for our staff not performing, shown below, and think about what needs fixing in our business to improve performance.

Note from Donald: *Using the boxes to the right, rate your business's performance out of 10, with 10 being excellent. For a more accurate evaluation, have each of your management and supervisory staff and a number of your front-line people complete this template. Below each of the 14 points, we've left space for your thoughts on how this problem can be solved, if it exists.*

1. There's a lack of clarity in our business. Staff don't understand exactly what we want done, the standard to which we want it done, or by when we want it done.

Lack of clarity is one of the biggest causes of non-performance in most businesses, and it's generally not the employee's fault. As leaders, creating clarity is *our* job. Lack of clarity can be caused by confusion at the top, poor communication, inadequate training, conflicting instructions or shifting priorities.

Make sure that everyone in our business is clear about what is expected of them and by when.

2. They lack the skills, tools, time or empowerment to do the job effectively.

As much as we'd like to blame our employees for this one, none of this is their fault. Make sure that every employee has the skills, information, tools, time and empowerment to do the job they've been given...and to do it safely and well.

- 3. We lack clear processes and systems in many parts of our business, so jobs are done differently each time, with loss of efficiency and inconsistent results. We see it as non-performance and blame them.**

Sorry, once again, not their fault. They're not in charge of creating effective 'process'...we are. Everything that happens between intent and delivery is 'process'. Without it, we'll not get the consistent and efficient outcomes we're looking for.

- 4. They don't understand why their job is important.**

OOPS, our fault again. According to many surveys, the #1 reason that employees stop trying is they believe that they and their job don't make a difference.

Make sure that every employee understands how they and their job affects customers, the Team and the bottom line. What they do *is* important. Reinforce that over and over.

- 5. A particular task doesn't need to be done! We just think it does. They get 'it' ...and we don't.**

This one's a bummer. They understand the reality of the situation better than we do. They're trying to save us time and money by not doing something that's wasteful or unproductive, and we see it as non-compliance or non-performance.

- 6. They have a better way to do it and have the guts to do it that better way and hope that we won't notice. But when we do notice, we see it as non-performance.**

These people are 'gold'. They're smart, they "get it", they care, and they take initiative. Don't beat up on them. In fact, maybe you should promote them, or at least hug them.

7. A personal problem/crisis is distracting them.

Sometimes good employees go into a tailspin because of some personal problem or crisis in their lives. The road of life contains 'potholes'. Now is our time to shine as an organization. Now is the time to show what we're really made of. How can we and the rest of the Team pitch in and support these folks?

But, we'll be clear about which problems or crises we are and are *not* prepared to support. We may be absolutely determined to help an employee with a sick child or an ailing parent...but not to support an employee with a cocaine addiction, one who beats their spouse, or threatens the life or safety of fellow Team members.

8. They're good people in the wrong job.

We've all seen this one. Many of us have been the 'square peg in the round hole' at some point in our career. We were given a job or task for which we simply were not suited.

For example, there are people who are great at managing people and there are people who are great at managing things. Never put a person who's great at managing things in charge of a bunch of people. It will end badly. Before sacking someone who seems to have some very good qualities, but who's not performing, see if some other job would make excellent use of their talents, personality and experience.

9. We've created a toxic culture or a culture of 'us and them' that breeds resentment, fear or stress. We have some supervisors who are incompetent, unfair or unreasonable. We have policies that create an adversarial environment. We tolerate bullying.

This is 100% our doing. As managers and leaders, we're in charge of the culture of the organization or our department.

Create a culture of excellence, urgency, fairness, appreciation, acknowledgement, celebration and joy. See Biz Tool #B-16 for tips on creating a winning culture.

10. They're underpaid or underappreciated...or both.

OOPS, sorry...our fault again. Underpaid people feel that they're being ripped off, so they either lower their performance to the level that they think they're being paid for, or they leave. Unappreciated people just wither away like a plant that hasn't been watered.

We need to attract, retain, engage and inspire top-performing 'talent'. What action will we take to pay our people competitively and fairly? What benefits can we offer or improve? Pay more...and expect more. And what will we do to look for behavior to praise, reward and celebrate?

11. The job is beyond their mental or physical abilities.

This means that we've put someone into a job that they're physically or mentally incapable of doing. But it's not their fault. They gave it their best shot, but they can't perform as required. Rather than beat them up for non-performance, graciously guide them into a job that they can do, or help them exit the organization gracefully.

12. They were great in the past, but now seem bored, 'burnt out' by the job, or by a combination of work and life pressures.

How can their job be made more interesting, or varied? Or should they be moved to a different job to give them a change of duties? How could we help them balance their work and life priorities? What coaching or flexible hours might they need? Maybe they've been working long hours for too long and just need a break. Can we accommodate this?

13. They're related to 'the boss' or they're a shareholder in the business and are incompetent or think they can do whatever they want. Their non-performance is hurting the business directly and sets a bad example for others.

As difficult as this problem is, it must be dealt with. Either they perform and behave appropriately, or they leave. If they're toxic shareholders, they need to be bought out. Otherwise, they'll destroy the business, or seriously erode its growth and future value.

14. They simply don't want to do it. They're lazy, irresponsible or have a toxic attitude and never should have been hired in the first place.

Some people are simply poor performers or toxic for reasons that exist entirely within themselves. We don't have the time or resources to save these people. We'll get our documentation together and then move them out of the business quickly. Good people leave because bad people are allowed to stay.

Also, how will we improve our hiring process to screen these people out before we hire them?

ACTION TO TAKE: Make a list of all employees who are not performing as they should. Then, determine as best you can which of these 14 reasons might be at play. It could be a combination of reasons.

Have a private, calm conversation with each 'non-performer'. Be specific about their shortcomings and explain how it's hurting the business, your customers, the Team and the bottom line. Ask them for their insight as to why their performance is not as it needs to be. Since many of the reasons might be the business's fault and not theirs, ask them to be frank and assure them that you want to hear the truth. Ask for specific examples. Then, sort out the difference between 'reasons' and 'excuses'.

The next step for each specific non-performance situation is to determine an agreed course of action on their part, or on your part...or on both your parts to improve performance to where it needs to be.

Be specific about the level of performance that the business requires from them. This is no time for vague generalities. Get and document their commitment on a fair but specific timeline by which that level of performance will be achieved.

When confronted with their lack of performance, some employees, especially those in category #14 above, will simply resign and solve your problem. For those who commit to improve, agree to fix what needs fixing on your end and then support, encourage and coach them on their journey to top-performance. Follow up and measure performance. Let them know if you see them slipping back a bit and get them back on track. Remember, the world is run by those who follow up.

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