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# Motivating Factors: How to Reach the Underperforming Employee

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Mashable shared an article last month cautioning hiring managers against “paycheck employees,” those workers who do the bare minimum to earn their check. Underperforming and unmotivated workers are not only bad for the bottom line, they can also drag down the morale of their colleagues. How can a manager change the attitudes of these unengaged workers and foster a more productive work environment?

If an employee withdraws from the work environment, if they are late to work, absent frequently, and late with assignments, those are signs they are underperforming. Uncovering the reasons why an employee performs below expectations is the first step. Is a lack of motivation the reason? Or are their skills and the job requirements not a match?

## Clear Expectations

With the latter, Jason Lauritsen, director of the Best Places to Work program at Quantum Workplace, says, “The simple thing managers overlook is the power of being clear about expectations upfront.” All positions come with both performance and behavior expectations and managers should be clear about both from the start. A lack of clarity can cause the employee to wonder, “What am I supposed to be doing?” From the get-go, managers remove uncertainty and be clear. Lauritsen asks, “Are you communicating expectations with the employee?”

When a worker’s talents and desires are not matched to the job, according to Lauritsen, it causes them to perform below expectations. To succeed, people need to be in roles suited to their natural abilities.

Mike Christian, assistant professor of Organizational Behavior at the UNC Kenan-Flagler School of Business, wants managers to give people the ability to have variety in their jobs. “People enjoy feeling like they are not an automaton,” he said. This job crafting gives a sense of responsibility, leading to higher engagement.

Christian said, “Research has shown that one of the most important aspects of work is having personal control over your job.” Managers can connect the job to something that is meaningful to the worker, so they feel there is significance to their tasks.

## Five Steps to Better Performance

When the issue is a mismatch of skills and job, as an article in Mind Tools explains, the manager has five options. First, resupply the workers with what they need to meet expectations. Second, retrain them, keeping their skills current through continuing education options, such as conferences and webinars. Third, refit the job. Can you break down its components and assign certain responsibilities to other employees who may be better at fulfilling them? Fourth, reassign the worker to another job in the company that’s a better fit for his aptitudes.

Fifth and finally, release the poor performer. Refitting and/or reassigning are not possible in every situation and managers may need to cut their losses and move on. They must remember that underperforming employees will affect the entire department, as others must pick up the slack.

### Behavior Predictors

“The million-dollar question” Lauritsen said, is whether a hiring manager can spot a so-called “paycheck employee” before hiring. He said a common school of thought holds thorough interviewing will prevent such a worker from getting the offer. Yet, he said, “A lot of leaders spend too little time on the front end evaluating people and making sure they are not hiring the wrong people.”

Christian said, “There are points where you recruit when you can pre-emptively determine who will be that type of employee.” Behavioral interviews reveal important information about how a candidate approaches work. Questions about how the candidate would reply to negative feedback would reveal important information about their motivation. Christian said workers with more optimistic viewpoints are more engaged in jobs and pre-hire surveys can help select for that trait.

The hiring manager must do his or her due diligence on the applicant and thoroughly vet their employment history. Christian suggests hiring managers ask prior employers about punctuality, dependability and responsibility: “Those are traits for taking your work seriously which translates into engagement.”

### Sharper Focus

Another cause of poor performance is the worker’s lack of motivation. Lauritsen said, “We’re dealing with human beings who have lives.” He wants managers to remember that personal issues can sometimes get in the way of an employee’s ability to focus.

Those personal glitches are often temporary and the worker’s performance will eventually even out. What about more lasting displays of a lack of motivation?

Lauritsen advises managers to dole out encouragement, acknowledging effort and saying thank you. Don’t just recognize the big accomplishments, he suggests, but also praise the smaller, yet important goals an employee hits. One critical mistake, according to Christian, is not giving enough feedback. Feedback on the way employees are doing their job helps them know where they stand. Sharing the results of their work is a strong motivator.

Another way to foster motivation is by fostering two-way communication. When employees provide input and feel their voices are heard and valued, it creates engagement. Engagement and retention are intertwined, as workers will want to stay if they are more invested in their job and their workplace. Christian wants managers to ask, “What do people wish they could improve about their job? How can they make it more meaningful?”

The experts from Mind Tools agree. Offering timely, open, honest, and personalized feedback is a key step in improving poor performance that stems from a lack of motivation. Another way to encourage engagement, is, as Lauritsen notes, setting clear performance goals so workers understand management’s expectations. Managers should then offer performance assistance, the resources and reassurances the employee needs to meet those goals.

### Unsuccessful Motivators

As a motivator, money only works up to a point. “Extrinsic motivators, like pay, are important, but they are not everything,” Christian said. Once someone has enough to satisfy their family’s needs, additional salary won’t raise their engagement levels.

According to Lauritsen, anything that creates fear is an unsuccessful motivator. Old-fashioned command and control-style management, when the supervisor orders the worker around and bullies them into compliance, will not lead to increased engagement. Rather, it promotes a culture of fear, and then will eventually lead workers to leave the company.

“People fundamentally want to do a good job,” Lauritsen said. By tapping into their innate accountability and creating a supportive environment, managers may be able to bring underperforming employees up a level.