



**SOCIETY OF
ACTUARIES**

Article from
The Stepping Stone
Issue 73

PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

The Four Roles of a Leader: Performance Problem Remedies

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It's not unusual for leaders to encounter an employee who is performing below their potential. It's common to label this individual as "they don't care" or "they're just not good." But this could be a costly mistake.

We owe it to our people to make a better assessment as to the cause of poor performance, and even more important, give them the leadership support they need to correct the situation.

DIAGNOSE THE ROOT CAUSE OF POOR PERFORMANCE

If you have a poor performer on your team, it's because of one or more of the following four situations:

1. **They are Unaware.** They lack some vital piece of information that would dramatically improve their performance.
2. **They are Unable.** They lack the skills, knowledge, experience or core resources required to do the job well.
3. **They are Unwilling.** They may be fully aware and fully able, but, for a wide variety of reasons, they are unwilling to do the job at the required level.
4. **They are Unsuitable.** There is a mismatch between the employee and the task they are being asked to do. Unlike someone who is unable, no amount of training or education will get someone who is unsuitable to the performance level needed. They are just not wired to do that particular task.

It's important to diagnose the root cause, and not stop at the secondary causes for the performance problems, if you wish to help turn the performance around. For example, someone may be unwilling because they lack the ability (i.e., the root cause) and therefore the confidence to perform the task. Or someone

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may appear unable, but the root cause is that they are unaware of certain expectations of the task.

THE REMEDIES FOR POOR PERFORMANCE

The remedies for these root causes are what I call the Four Roles of a Leader: the Manager, the Trainer, the True Leader and the Counselor. As the team leader, you need to serve the appropriate role to help your employee once you diagnose the root cause (or causes) of their subpar performance (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
The Four Roles of Leadership in Remediating Poor Performance

Root Cause of Poor Performance	The Leader's Role to Remedy It
Unaware	The Manager
Unable	The Trainer
Unwilling	The True Leader
Unsuitable	The Counselor

Here is how it works:

- **When someone is Unaware, you need to be the Manager.** Awareness is at the core of what management is. A manager's job is to keep people aware of what is required for good performance: performance expectations, practices, policies, approaches, resource availability, deadlines, the big picture and many other things. If this is the diagnosed issue, more and better communication is required from the leader.
- **When someone is Unable, you need to be the Trainer.** Do they need to hone certain skills or develop deeper insights about the work they are doing? The Trainer makes sure the employee is equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed. As the Trainer, you must provide the resources to help your employee increase their ability, whether you provide that training personally or help guide the employee to the resources that will help them. The Trainer also helps simplify the task by providing a road map or breaking the task into smaller steps.



- **When someone is Unwilling, you need to be the True Leader.** Here you need to unlock a person's internal drive about achieving results. Finding their mission, casting a compelling vision, taking a risk, feeling that they are part of something greater than themselves—these and so many more techniques are ways a leader can awaken desire in the employee to perform in greater ways.
- **When someone is Unsuitable, you need to be the Counselor.** What's needed here is the compassion and creativity to help your employee find a position that's right for them—whether that means restructuring their current position to fit them better or finding a new position inside or outside the organization. I've witnessed many subpar performers become aces overnight when they are plugged into the right

position. In the more extreme case where a job change is required, this may be difficult news for your employee to receive. But in the long run they will be better off being in a situation where they can thrive and succeed.

When dealing with employees who are struggling to perform, one-size-fits-all leadership won't work. First, diagnose the root cause of the poor performance and then utilize the appropriate leadership role to help your employees grow and succeed! ■



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