



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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Managing Marginal Performers

One problem that many managers never get comfortable with is dealing with poor performers. This is especially true if they are not meeting expectations, but perhaps not to the level where they should be fired. You coach them and praise them when you can, but still, you cannot count on them to get their deliverables done on time, or at the right level of quality.

In many respects, it is easier as a project manager to deal with the process side of project management, including creating a workplan, managing issues, risk, etc. This situation is more challenging because it deals with the other side of project management – managing, motivating and leading people.

People are all unique and a solution for one does not necessarily work with someone else. You must also account for team dynamics, where people may behave differently because of a group culture than they might behave individually. All that being said, you still have the challenge to try to manage your people and complete your project successfully. You should look at a number of possible causes of poor performance. Think about these areas separately for each person on the team where performance is a problem.

Options to Consider

1. First, does everyone have the right skills and experience? Sometimes people do not deliver up to expectations because they do not have the right skills to do the job. For instance, you assign a person to complete the analysis for a new set of reports, but they are not sure how to ask the right questions or frame a discussion with the customers. People that are late delivering code may be struggling trying to understand why they are getting the logic errors they are. A related question is whether they have the right level of training. They may have the basics but do they need advanced concepts?

If anyone falls into this category, you need to decide whether he or she could do the work with the right training. Training could mean a class, computer-based training or even pairing him or her up with someone more experienced. If he or she does not have the right skills and cannot be easily trained, then the question comes up as to whether he or she can be replaced with someone with a better skill set for your project, or if there is a productive role that the person can play given his or her set of skills and experience.

2. If people have the right skills, then ask whether they really understand what the expectations are. For instance, sometimes when a team member misses a deadline, he or she might come back and say that he or she did not think the work was due at that time. Or, instead of completing three programs on a certain date, he or she may have thought he or she only needed to have completed one.



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The project manager needs to evaluate what people say when they do not fulfill expectations. If there is some confusion on what the expectation was, then new techniques need to be used. For instance, this could include having the person confirm back to you in writing what the expectations are for deliverables and dates. You could also discuss assignments and status as a team, so that each person states to the rest of the team what their current assignments and due dates are.

3. Another area to consider is whether there are any business or personal factors that could explain a person's performance. For instance, some people on the team could be distracted if your company is in the process of being purchased. A member of your team also may not be very motivated to work if his or her spouse is very ill. There may not be a way to resolve these situations, but you are looking for reasons why certain people might not be performing up to expectations. If you can find a cause, it will give you some ability to respond, or at least acknowledge it.
4. If people have the right skills and the right expectations, then the Project Manager's options become more limited, and you start to enter the realm of the Human Resources department. It is possible that some team members are not going to do be able to perform up to expectations. They may not be willing to do the job, or they may not be able to do the work regardless of the training and support you provide. If you feel you are at this point, you need to get your manager involved, and usually the Human Resources Department as well. They will give guidance about what types of remedies are available and acceptable within your company and your country. In the United States, this could lead to a period of documenting performance expectations and results, putting a person on a formal performance plan, and ultimately a reassignment, or termination, if necessary. However, these are not the kinds of things that the project manager can take on.

Project Management Processes

Even though you have a people issue, you can also utilize process experience to help mitigate the problems you are encountering. For instance, if people are missing significant delivery dates, then you will probably be at risk of the schedule slipping. In that case, you can utilize risk management to consider alternatives with your team and your customer on how to get back on track. If dates have to slip, then you have an issue. Raise this to your team and customer and get their feedback on how the problem can be resolved. If people are delivering late because they are doing more work than was assigned, you may have a scope change process that needs to be working better. If people are not delivering to the right level of quality, you may need to utilize quality management to set guidelines for what deliverables should look like and what the right level of quality is. Document all of these items in your status reports and status meetings to ensure the customer knows what the problems are and can participate in finding solutions. This is important to manage expectations. You do not have to be personal, just use the processes. For instance, if the dates start to slip, let the customer know its dates are being missed on the project plan. You do not have to say that anyone is lazy or is a



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poor performer – just state that dates are being missed, and you are looking for ways to correct the situation.

Summary

It is difficult and frustrating to work with and rely upon people who do not come through. After you look at the problems and try to determine what the cause is, you may just decide that it is performance issue and the person is not able or willing to do the job. At that point you will need to seek help from your manager and the Human Resources Department to determine the best way for resolution.