

Want more high performance? Address the reality of low performance.

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Thomas Jefferson allegedly said [“nothing is more unequal than the equal treatment of unequal people”](#). This quotation might be a bit of an overstatement, but it does call out the importance of recognizing that while all employees may be valuable, some employees are inevitably more valuable than others. It is neither fair nor effective to manage a company as though everyone performs at the same level. This isn't just about recognizing high performers. It is also about effectively addressing low performance.

One of the most important environmental factors affecting performance of employees is the performance levels of their coworkers. The drive and skills of people is influenced by the drive and skills of the people around them. Observing others influences how we define effective performance. What we believe is impressive, possible, or simply expected at work is defined in part based on what our coworkers are accomplishing. Depending on the individual and company culture, this might manifest itself through competition, inspiration, support, peer pressure, or all of the above.

Our performance is affected by the performance of others

High performing people draw energy and ideas from being around other high performers. They also lose energy and inspiration when they are forced to work with people that don't share their focus on doing the best job possible. To use a fitness analogy, imagine you go for a 5k run with a group of people. You start running at what you think is a healthy pace. Over time, whether you think this pace is fast or slow will start to depend on the pace of people running around you. If you take pride in running fast you will find it frustrating to get stuck behind slower runners. If you have neither the desire or ability to keep up with the fastest person, you are still likely to feel some pressure or disappointment if you fall behind the last person in the group.

Humans are herd animals and we pay attention to what the rest of the herd is doing. There are individual differences in how much people focus on others' performance and how they react to competition. But all people are affected by the performance of others in one way or another. To paraphrase the poet John Donne, [no one is an island](#).

What do you do with low performers?

In my experience, there are two general kinds of low performers. The first might be called “strugglers”. Strugglers are not counterproductive, they just aren't productive enough. It is important to confront these people in a constructive manner and work with them to get back on track. Not just for their sake, but because tolerating their current underperformance will create a drag on the performance of others. Although strugglers currently have bad performance they are not bad employees. They are good employees who are finding it hard to meet expectations at a given point in time. Part of coaching them is giving them confidence

that they can be successful. You want and often need these people on the team. But you need them to act differently in the future from how they have acted in the past.

The other kind of low performers might be called “misfits”. These are people whose behavior is actively detracting from the performance and morale of the company and their coworkers. These people may be in the wrong job or may simply have the wrong attitude toward their work. These are people who must “shape up or ship out”. Most misfits are a result of hiring the wrong person for a job, changing a person’s job to the point that they can no longer perform it effectively, or having a person undergo a change in attitude toward their job due to non-work related issues. For morale and legal reasons it is important to give misfits a chance to improve, but it is equally important to get them out of the job if they fail to get better.

High performers are affected by treatment of low performers

Other employees watch how you deal with low performers. If you tolerate low performance people will assume that low performance is acceptable, even if they personally hold themselves to a higher standard. On the other hand, employees also notice if you treat low performers in a cruel and insensitive manner. Even consistent high performers are likely to struggle with performance at some point in their career. When this happens, employees remember how the company treated others in this situation. Whether they constructively engage with the organization to address performance issues, attempt to hide their challenges, or simply quit will depend largely on how you treated their coworkers in the past.

Your managers need and want help addressing underperformance.

A company cannot consistently attract, retain and fully leverage high performing employees if it ignores low performing employees. And when [managers were asked where they need help with performance management](#), one of the most common answers was helping those “struggling” employees they value but whose current performance is not meeting expectations. Many people talk about performance management as though it is all about recognizing and supporting high performers. But you cannot have a true high performance organization if you don’t also effectively address the reality of low performance.