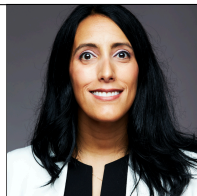# Performance Is an Ongoing Conversation

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What can you do when a goal is realistic, conversations are happening, and a person is still not performing as expected in their role? A performance improvement plan (PIP) is not the only course of action. There are many strategies to address performance challenges sooner, and they greatly depend on the cause of the problem—a specific event versus something systemic.

Event-Based Behavior

Events like a breakup, family changes, illness, and more challenge us all and make it difficult to focus on work. It's your responsibility as a leader to create space for life to happen and expect that there might always be something going on in your organization. Here are some things you may want to try in this situation:

- Use your one-on-ones to discuss what is happening in your report's life, provide time off, or explore the possibility of a leave. Remind your report that they can take advantage of the company's counseling resources (if you have this benefit).

- Have a notion of how much the current situation is affecting your direct report's goals so that you can help course correct after things settle down. I like to keep an achievement log for myself and all of my direct reports and use it to frame our discussions. We make sure that we note big wins and accomplishments, and then I compare them to the objectives that I know my report wants to achieve. If there's already enough progress in a specific area, the temporary slowdown is not as impactful.

Ultimately, you might not be able to do much about what's causing diminished performance in this case. But you can weather the storm together and remember where true north is so you can get back there when it passes.

Systemic Behavior

There can be many reasons why underperformance becomes systemic, and the way you address them is very much aligned with the nature of the problem. Here are a few strategies that you might want to try when performance suffers:

- Inability to follow through:
  - Try some lightweight goal setting, training, mentorship, rescoping of work
  - Provide the option of extra program management support (if you have it)
  - Use your one-on-ones to assess together how well different approaches are working and to promptly communicate blockers
- Team dynamics getting in the way:
  - Look at your team processes, current staffing needs, work demands, and so on and make adjustments. For example, if work can't be completed due to code reviews being difficult to come by, have the team prioritize reviews above new work to unblock peers. Or if your code review cycles are too long, you can help the team articulate a shared criteria around good reviews (maybe for this system we care more about stability than code style). A shared language might help your team avoid pedantic arguments that consume too much review time.
- Lack of motivation or when problems have become stale:
  - If possible, add variety to your report's responsibilities, like mentoring junior engineers on the domain they are experts in so that they can take over the tasks that have become so monotonous.
  - You might want to look into resetting job responsibilities to broaden the scope. Have this person assist in areas that are different, or maybe even facilitate a move to a different project.
- Constant exhaustion:
  - Keep an eye out for your team's workload and emergency interventions. A team who has been performing heroics keeping a system up won't be able to sustain regular performance expectations and is well deserving of some rest.
  - Keep track of on-call rotations, incidents, number of alerts firing, and prioritize their remediations. Fixing the root cause of operational exhaustion is paramount.

- Goals being unclear:
  — It's difficult to be enthusiastic about a task that comes out of the blue and seems arbitrary. By clarifying objectives and contextualizing work within business needs, you can help your reports understand why something needs to be done. Sometimes, clarification of the business goal can even result in a more efficient solution with greater team buy-in.

Lastly, there is a special case of systemic behavior from which it is extremely difficult to recover. When a working relationship turns adversarial, it is very rare that things will get better, no matter how much you try. You have my sympathy if you're ever in this spot. It's one of the most difficult and demoralizing times for a leader. Here are some things to explore when performance suffers due to an adversarial relationship with your direct report:

- Reach out to your HR person and ask for guidance.
- Hone in your conflict navigation skills. Attend workshops for having difficult conversations, providing effective feedback, etc.
- Prepare for your one-on-ones; you might even want to have the main points written down to make sure you phrase things well.
- Consider having one-on-ones mediated by someone from HR if things are really bad.
- Don't neglect your self-care, this situation will drain you and very much stress you out.

And, most important, don't put off taking action. When things are not going well set a kind and reasonable resolution time in your mind, try everything you can to improve things, and if things don't get better stick to your decision date. Reach out to HR and explore your company's formal processes for termination. It's very difficult to end a working relationship but you owe it to your team to not put off the decision.

To sum up, many causes can affect an individual's performance. Taking the time to diagnose them allows you to better respond and support your direct reports. Even though some things might be beyond your control, you have the advantage of sharing a common goal: the growth and nurturing of their career.