“You need to make Anil do his job!”

My client, let’s call her Robin, received this text from her sales manager during their virtual leadership meeting. As a food manufacturer, her company is deemed essential during the pandemic. But like many managers today, Robin is feeling the pressure of running a $1.5B division remotely with a team whose nerves are starting to fray.

Anil, her customer operations manager, was a strong performer back in the office. Remote work, however, has not been kind to him. Though he claimed to have his tasks under control, with three children under 10 and a wife who also works, things were falling through the cracks. Salespeople had begun to receive complaints from desperate restaurant customers. Orders were arriving incorrectly and late. Since their businesses depend on every order to survive, these mistakes posed a serious threat.
Despite being an empathetic and skilled leader, Robin was struggling to hold Anil accountable. Difficult conversations are her Achilles heel, and she's not alone. One study shows that 18% of top executives say holding others accountable is their greatest weakness. The guilt many managers like Robin feel has been made worse by the current crisis and the pressure to remain compassionate of what others may be going through — not to mention the challenge of giving feedback virtually.

At the same time, an employee who isn't keeping up while working remotely is a problem that cannot be ignored. In fact, poor performance consumes up to 17% of a leader's job (equivalent to roughly one day a week), and today, given the state of the economy, its financial costs are intensified.

So how can leaders like Robin confront team members who are struggling to successfully work remotely while also remaining sensitive to the times? It requires a broader approach and different skills than many leaders are used to. But there are several ways to learn them:

**Expand your diagnostic lens.**

With many unfamiliar variables introduced by Covid-19, getting to the bottom of a new performance problem is more complicated. Prior to the pandemic, most leaders might have reflexively zeroed in on the underperformer as the primary unit of analysis and presumed the problem was the result of insufficient skills, lack of initiative, commitment, and/or a poor attitude.
While these often play some role in underperformance, they rarely account for all of it. That's why focusing on the underperformance vs. the underperformer leads to better problem solving. This is especially true today when a myriad of new factors could be contributing to the issue.

Before confronting your underperformer, use these questions to help you figure out what those factors may be:

**What's different?** When you’re dealing with someone who has just recently started to underperform, begin by identifying new variables that could be interfering with their work. Have there been recent organizational shifts? Difficulties in their personal life? For many, working from home has presented several technical and self-management challenges. Isolating which factors may be presenting legitimate obstacles to your employee's job will require you to have sensitive and persistent conversations with them. In the case of Robin, she assumed that Anil's demanding home life was a large factor. Feeling bad for him, she restrained from addressing the issue. As it turns out, her hesitance kept the real causes concealed.

**What's worse?** Working virtually, as many of us are, will undoubtedly amplify weak areas of your organization: clunky processes may feel more cumbersome; getting information in a culture of secrecy may now feel impossible; work-arounds people have adopted to cope with outmoded technologies will likely break down. But leaders must be able to identify which broader organizational performance issues may be contributing to an employee's performance issue. Sometimes you may not know until you have the conversation, but it's important to consider all the factors before a confrontation. You want your employee to trust that you've thought through the situation and considered it from their view. They will be less likely to use those broader issues as an excuse.

**What's fact, what's emotion?** In a crisis, anxiety, anger, and fear can lead to blame, defensiveness, and irrationality, which worsen when we're isolated. As such, it's even more critical to separate emotion from fact in these situations. Leaders experiencing frustration around an underperformer will need to acknowledge the presence of these emotions, and honor them, before they are able to set them aside. Once you do, you will be more equipped to discuss what is factually true. In Robin's case, the team's and customer's anger amplified her and Anil's guilt, clouding everyone's judgment about how to identify and solve the real problem.

**What's mine, what's theirs?** Healthy accountability starts with a leader acknowledging they may play a role in someone's underperformance. Have you been clear about what you expect from your newly remote team? Have you provided needed resources, coaching, and feedback? Is there a gap in your leadership contributing to the problem? Robin’s misassumption about Anil’s stressful home life became the perfect excuse to justify not
addressing him. But this contributed to the problem. Anil’s failure to ask for help, offer creative solutions, and set expectations about how his new normal were his contributions to the problem.

Show empathy without lowering the bar.

“Who do I throw under the bus?” Robin asked me. “My customers, who need my products to survive, or one of my top leaders who is up against tough constraints with a family to care for?” Her unmanaged anxiety and confrontation-avoidance backed her into a false-binary corner, leading her to ask the wrong question. What she needed to ask was, “How do I help my key leader succeed?” Ultimately, she was confusing empathy with lowered expectations. Her fear of making Anil “feel bad” wasn’t compassionate, it was cowardice.

You can demonstrate your care for an employee’s struggles by both acknowledging their hardship and redoubling efforts to help them succeed. The best way to have these conversations right now is through a video call so that you are able to read one another’s tone and expressions. When you start the discussion, remember that this behavior is new for your employee too, and they are likely already feeling badly for struggling. “Check in” before you “check on” as a rule. Ask how they are doing to gauge their well-being. Then, clarify that your goal for the conversation is to help resolve the problem at hand.

To begin, use probing questions like, “Why do you feel this is happening?” Listen carefully to how they describe the situation. If they deny there is a problem, you may have mismatched expectations. If they point fingers, make repeated excuses, or refuse to take responsibility, you may have someone in the wrong role.

When Robin finally confronted Anil, she discovered that the fulfillment process at her company was the real problem. Their data systems were still tied together by laborious manual processes, including spreadsheets, heroics, and hallway handoffs. To avoid catastrophes in the office, Anil and his team routinely ran between buildings with key information. “Running between buildings” had now become endless texts, slacks, and emails. Anil couldn’t keep up.

Through their conversation, Robin learned that a crisis doesn’t let people off the hook from delivering the same level of results they did before. It means the path to those results might need to shift, and it was her job, as the leader, to help Anil discover that path.

Engage the underperformer in problem solving.

In my experience, performance shortfalls, especially sudden ones, are best resolved by asking the person in question to be responsible for solving the problem. Once you’ve identified what the issue is, ask, “What would you change if you could?” or “What can we all learn from this?” to open their imagination and signal that you trust their ability to improve.
Resist telling them what to do, or being overly prescriptive about how to do it. You don’t want to dilute their ownership and commitment. Remember that working in isolation can make people more anxious about their mistakes, and this is a person who is used to seeing success. Reassuring your employee that you are OK with missteps as long they are corrected and learned from will help empower them to solve the problem on their own. At the same time, you should remain available to provide guidance when needed. This may require instituting more frequent check-ins to compensate for the changing conditions.

To redirect her conversation with Anil, Robin asked, “What can we do right now to help you? How can our whole team help make sure every order is on time and accurate?” This gave Anil permission to ask for help without deepening his shame. It also opened the door to creative, interim solutions. “I know these are tough days, and I know we can do better,” she said. “I need you to come back to me with a plan you are confident will get all orders out the door on time and accurately.”

Anil took less than a day to build a plan and get his peers on board.

**Strengthen team accountability.**

There are a few things you can do to avoid this issue from reoccurring in the future. One of them is making sure that your team members realize their collective success belongs to one another — not just to you, the boss. Otherwise, you’ll end up playing air-traffic control for every result the team delivers, and spend more time managing what falls through the cracks than helping them achieve greater performance.

The toughest question I asked Robin was, “Why do you suppose your sales manager felt it was appropriate to send that text to you, instead of something more generative to Anil like, ‘Anil, we can see you are struggling. How can we help?’” Robin was stumped. I told her this interaction could be exposing another problem: excessive reliance on her for the team’s performance. I suggested that Robin go back to her sales manager and ask what it would have taken for him to reach out directly to Anil.

To avoid the situation Robin found herself in, there is one exercise you can use to strengthen your team’s sense of shared accountability during this crisis. In your next meeting, ask every person to identify how they rely on each of their team members. Then compare answers. There should be explicit commitments they each make to one another, in which you remain uninvolved.

Remember, your biggest contribution to those you lead is helping them be, and contribute, their best. When they fall short, your greatest show of compassion, especially right now, is to help them figure out whatever it takes to get back on track. In some cases, it may be more compassionate to loosen expectations, so long as you make that decision with people and not for them.
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