

## Why is the management of under-performance so difficult?

**Barney Jordaan<sup>1</sup>**

Ask any HR or line manager what their organisation's biggest employee-related headache is and they are more than likely to tell you that it is employee under-performance. Then ask them how many terminations they've had, for example, over the past 12 months for under-performance compared to misconduct. Almost without exception the response will be that there have been a number of the latter, but hardly any (if at all) of the former.

There's never any doubt, however, about the fact that under-performance detrimentally affects the organisation. Under performance affects the organisation at three levels. The first is the actual, measurable cost of, e.g. lost production, the cost of correcting mistakes, increased overtime and administrative costs, time spent managing the problem, etc. The second level includes the impact on fellow employees, on team work, morale, etc. These effects or costs are already difficult to quantify. The third level effects are beyond quantification, i.e. the impact on the organisation's brand and reputation of missed deadlines, quality problems, etc.

Why then, do managers struggle to manage this problem? Obvious reasons include the absence of an appropriate policy and procedure; lack of clear performance standards and, importantly, a belief that managing under-performance must coincide with the annual or bi-annual performance review and need not be addressed in between. Therefore the under-performing employee will for months have no clue, that she is not meeting the required standard and then the surprise is sprung on her when the time arrives for her performance review. The immediate effect thereof is a breakdown in trust. To make matters worse, the manager, in an effort to make this difficult conversation go away, awards her a score that is, by any measure, average at worst. However, when the time arrives for people to be selected for redundancy, or if a decision has to be made about the employee's suitability for promotion, that same manager will argue rather vociferously that the employee is rather useless.

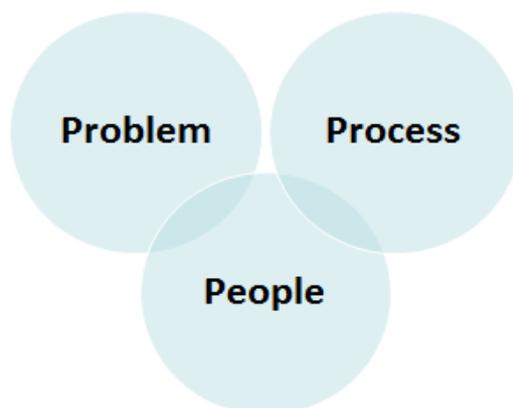
From my own experiences working with organisations of all sizes across many sectors, I believe that the problem goes much deeper and is essentially three-fold. First, many managers are not equipped with the skills to have difficult conversations in a productive way. The tendency is to avoid the problem for as long as possible and to invent excuses for this, e.g. a lack of support from HR; lack of time to address the problem; the problem will resolve itself; or, not making life even more difficult for the employee. Essentially the problem is one

---

<sup>1</sup> *Barney Jordaan is a director of Maserumule Consulting and professor extraordinaire at the Business School of Stellenbosch University.*

of aversion to conflict. However, ignoring the problem doesn't make it disappear. On the contrary, it has quite the opposite effect. Consequently, the manager eventually loses his patience and rushes into the HR office, demanding assistance to get rid of the employee. HR's advice that a rather lengthy procedure has to be followed to try and fix the problem is met with indignation: why must it take so long? The answer is obvious: because the problem was left unattended for so long. When the process is eventually started, the manager's aim is no longer to assist the employee in fixing the problem, but rather to get rid of her as quickly as possible. The conversation is strained, even antagonistic and the process followed becomes more adversarial. Several results flow from this: performance counselling gets a bad name; a message is sent to others about management's approach in such situations; the employer's investment in the employee is abandoned without an attempt to get a return from it; and, of course, there are legal risks and associated costs and uncertainties as well.

Second, not enough is done to nurture high-trust relationships at all levels in the organisation. There is ample evidence to suggest that if trust is high, managers tend to become more pro-active in addressing under-performance, more empathic, and less reliant on policies and procedures to manage the problem effectively. At the same time, employees in such relationships tend to be more forthcoming in providing managers with the information they need to understand and help address the problem. The conversations and process followed also tend to be friendlier and more cooperative. The 'PPP' (for Problem, Process and People) structure provides a useful structure for understanding the various components involved in resolving people related problems.



**Fig 1. The 'PPP' structure**

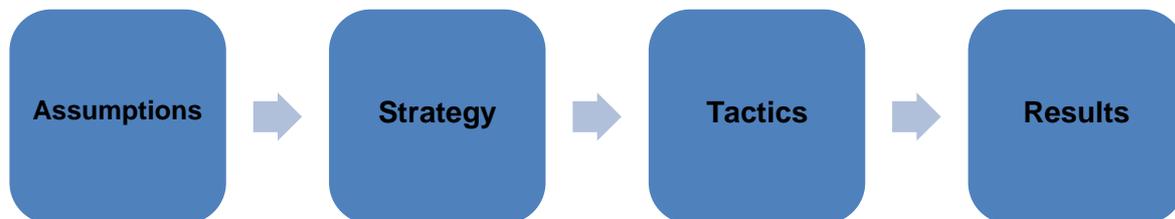
The Problem refers to the task at hand, or the issue to be addressed (the substance or merits). The toughest part of all, of course, is the People dimension: the fears, emotions and relationship issues that form an inseparable part of difficult conversations. While the Problem dimension can be approached rationally (left brain), the People issues also require



Legal Notice: This document is the property of The Virtual Learning Platform (Pty) Ltd. It is supplied subject to the express condition that the content shall not be used for purposes other than that for which it has been supplied. No reproduction, wholly or in part, without the prior written permission of the author, is allowed.

good people, communication, empathy and relationship skills (call it EQ if you will). These are typically right brain centred skills. Applying both simultaneously is hard to do, but necessary. If we are to find sustainable (as opposed to short-term quick fix) solutions to the problem, we need to 'separate the People from the Problem' and manage both during the conversation. In a case of under-performance, the Process followed will typically be a performance counselling process. Nevertheless, we tend to forget that we have a choice in terms of the attitudes and mind-sets we bring into the process. We may approach the problem in a collaborative or a positional, even adversarial, way. Approaching the problem in an adversarial way ('I'm the boss, it's my way or the highway; or an 'either-or' mentality), tends to put strain on the relationship (the People dimension) which will, in turn, limit the chances of cooperation and information exchange, resulting in a limited, sub-optimum solution to the Problem. On the other hand, if the relationship is strong, the Process tends to be more collaborative and the solutions to the Problem superior and sustainable.

To demonstrate this in a different way: our attitudes and assumptions affect our strategic approach to the problem, determine the tactics we employ and produce the results we achieve:



**Fig 2. Assumptions affect outcome**

The last obstacle is this: when managers do apply performance counselling processes, it is often done in a 'tick-the-box' or going-through-the-motions-fashion. There is no attempt to apply joint problem-solving skills to the process, i.e. to *put* heads together to find a solution instead of *knocking* heads together to arrive at a result. It has become a compliance exercise and nothing more.

The following 7-step collaborative problem-solving process may assist:

- Prepare for the discussion: gather the facts, make sure the standard is in place and that the employee has been trained. Prepare a brief opening statement keeping the focus on the problem and not the person.
- Create a problem-solving environment, free of distractions, i.e. the right 'mood music' for the occasion.
- State your concerns; highlight the impact of the under-performance on the team, you and the organisation; confirm your expectations; and ask the employee to state his or her side, encouraging him or her to make full disclosure of the factors that contribute to the problem. These may be of a personal nature, or relate to lack of skills or training, or factors in the work environment. It is important that you listen *actively* and confirm your understanding of what's being said. You've got to understand the



problem from both sides (it's similar to realising that Table Mountain has a flat appearance for those who live along the Cape West coast, but looks anything but flat for those living in the Southern Peninsula).

- With a fuller understanding of the problem and its underlying causes, brainstorm possible solutions to the problem, encouraging the employee to make contributions. Remember, with brainstorming we generate first before we evaluate.
- Once all available options have been tabled, evaluate them: look for a solution or (usually) a combination of solutions that will address the whole problem.
- Agree on an action plan for the way forward, or in the absence of agreement, decide on the way forward.

What you should have now, is an instrument with which to manage the problem in a more sustainable way. The instrument should include the frequency of the meetings, monitoring arrangements, provide a timeframe for improvement, identify assistance to be provided to the employee, the employee's obligations, etc. A similar process can be used to address ill health and absenteeism problems. This way of addressing the problem also tends to have a beneficial effect on the relationship between the supervisor or manager and the employee concerned.

While there is never an easy solution to problems of under-performance, merely focusing on what the law requires for a fair dismissal will not address your problem effectively. The ability to get the basics right (strong relationships, facing the problem speedily and putting heads together for a solution) lies at the heart of effective performance management.

