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## 4 Keys to Coaching Underperforming Employees

**Dealing with an employee who's struggling to keep up? These 4 simple steps will help you make your team stronger.**

By Lee Colan | Jul 29, 2013

Winning leaders are those who coach good employees to become better people. These leaders equip their teams for success at work and at home.

Occasionally, though, leaders can get so enamored with new approaches and cutting-edge technologies that they forget to do the basics. Coaching is one such example. Whatever the latest new trend or book about leadership, the fact is that you are dealing with human beings.

Humans at work share fundamental needs that have never changed, regardless of generation, geography, nationality or gender: We all want to be informed, we want our opinions to matter, we want to be involved in creating changes and improvements, and we want to be acknowledged for our efforts.

When you are coaching team members, cut through the clutter and address these needs in four simple steps: explain, ask, involve, and appreciate.

**Step 1: Explain.** Clearly describe why something needs to change. Answering the "why" question is a key motivator--it gives meaning to our work. Be *proactive* by answering the fundamental four questions employees ask, whether or not you actually hear them:

- Where are we going? (Strategy)
- What are we doing to get there? (Plans)
- What can I do to contribute? (Roles)
- What is in it for me? (Rewards)

Clearly explain to the team member how his or her performance affects the team and how that ultimately affects job security, promotional opportunities, recognition, credibility, chances for new projects, and financial rewards.

**Step 2: Ask.** Confirm that your employee understands. Don't proceed until you and the employee are both perfectly clear. Listen 80 percent and talk 20 percent. In a situation dealing with a performance issue, do not react emotionally. Wait for an appropriate break in the employee's work, and seek to understand why the employee did not perform. Reserve judgment until you've listened to his or her answers.

**Step 3: Involve.** Discuss ideas for potential solutions and approaches. Continue your discussion to identify the root cause for the performance gap (focus on performance, not the person). Solving symptoms is easy (and also futile), so ensure you identify the root cause.

Collaborate with the employee to set *SMART* (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-framed) performance goals for improvement. Then, ask yourself, "What can *I* do to prevent this in the future?" Winning leaders always look inside to see what they can improve.

If performance does not improve, your discussion should focus on the team member's ability to keep commitments to you, rather than on the performance problem itself.

**Step 4: Appreciate.** Recognize positive movement or effort in order to encourage continued progress toward the agreed-upon goal. Look for things they are doing well and reinforce it. Demonstrate your appreciation for who they are, not just what they are doing.

Take these four steps and you will be on the pathway to boosting accountability and performance.