

How to deal with toxic underperformers



Much has been said about the positive characteristics of **leadership**. To be a good leader, for instance, you should be able to motivate your team towards a goal. The ability to mentor others and help them in their professional growth is also associated with effective leadership. It should be said that leadership entails a deep accountability, and oftentimes that accountability is put to the test when a leader is faced with tough decisions.

According to Erin Urban, a career and [professional development](#) coach, the ability to make hard decisions with grace and professionalism is one of the most overlooked critical skills to ensure lasting leadership. "It's more popular to discuss and encourage the positive characteristics of leadership," she notes. "We don't often want to focus on the tough choices that leaders must make."

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Tough decisions are what make **great leaders**, and Urban cites two particular "toxic situations" where excellent team leadership is demanded.

Handling Toxic Team Members

Once you realise you have a toxic **team environment** on your hands, you need to act quickly because, as Urban points out, rarely do these types of issues resolve themselves.

- 1. Scope the problem.** Understanding the facts will be critical to making a decision that is best for the team. Interview team members individually to evaluate their perspective impartially.
- 2. Be candid.** Encourage your team to openly discuss the situation with you. However, situations like this are not comfortable for many people. Establish a **blameless environment** for effective discovery.
- 3. Be impartial.** Set aside your natural bias and individual preferences in order to come to a factual understanding of the current state. Note that it's very common for toxic [team members](#) to be on their best behaviour with you while acting poorly towards everyone else.
- 4. Be thorough.** Invest the energy to understand the situation from various angles. Discuss the situation with your upper management as applicable (and allowable). You may want to evaluate complex circumstances with a **human resources** representative.
- 5. Be open.** Be open to being surprised, being wrong or even pursuing a line of enquiry that doesn't make sense to you at first. The more information you have, the better your resulting decision will be.

6. Establish a plan. After identifying the root cause, help the team member to arrive at an improvement or **resolution plan**. Instead of telling, ask what the team member feels is the best way forward. People are more accountable to plans they helped derive.

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7. Follow up. Often you will see progress almost immediately. Later on, the team member might lose focus or slip back into old habits. It takes longer than you think to establish a new routine. **Hold people accountable**, and follow up regularly.

Managing Underperformers

Glossing over an underperformer's impact on your business is a bad idea. Ignoring this problem could cause your **team morale** to drop and, as a result, productivity will suffer. Managing underperformers is essential for a healthy team.

1. Establish expectations. It's critical to establish expectations with your team and develop a robust feedback loop. If you don't perform regular one-on-one meetings for employee development, then meet with the underperformer and set up a plan for improvement.

2. Consider the importance of a PIP. A performance improvement plan (PIP) establishes the expectation of change for the team member. No one should be blind-sided by a bad performance review nor should a person have a surprise reprimand for underperforming.

3. Involve human resources. Typically a PIP is a collaboration between you, the employee and an HR representative. The HR professional is there to ensure equality in representation and fair business practices, among others.

4. Stick to the plan. Meet with your challenging team member to explain the process, provide feedback and establish improvement deadlines for **problem behaviours**. It's good practice to clearly communicate the next steps so the employee can prioritise wisely.

5. Understand the process. If necessary, meet with HR to understand the process for removing unresponsive chronic underperformers from your team. From time to time, the employee can be given an alternate position that more closely fits their skill sets. If they are actively toxic, however, they need to find employment elsewhere.

6. Be firm and fair. When facing the necessity of removing an underperformer, stand your ground and consider the best decision for the team. As a leader, the health of your team and the organisation is your priority — not individual preferences.

7. Do not apologise. At no time and under no circumstances should you apologise for making the best decision for your team. You can, however, be empathic to any emotional responses to the change and help your group build positive **team dynamics**.

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