

*Denver Business Journal by Garry Duncan*

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## **Low Performers Impact Everyone on the Sales Team**

Many sales teams have members performing below expected standards, who have mediocre skills, and are considered 'on the bubble' regarding continued employment. The question is whether to ignore the problem or to invest time and resources to correct the unacceptable results. Ignoring poor performance creates a silent, but far more costly and serious, problem. That problem is lower morale and productivity of the remaining team members.

Consider the message you are sending to every team member when you ignore low performance and productivity. Nonperformance is more than just missing sales goals. Unacceptable behavior includes being late to meetings, slow response to management and client requests, missing report and expense timelines, and being disrespectful to management or other co-workers. It is like a child who continually comes home late and never receives punishment or a reprimand. The message is that it is okay to come home late, because there are no consequences. Likewise, the salesperson that continually underperforms, or continually misses deadlines for reports, or other items learns it is okay because there are no penalties.

Justification for not correcting the issue usually involves thinking along the lines of, "I don't want to lose the business we currently have with that representative, and I don't have time to hire and train someone new right now. I will fix it later. Sales may improve anyway because there have been a couple good months this year." Meanwhile teammates think, "Why should I have to do this, others don't have to do it." They harbor resentment, good performers start slacking, teamwork, productivity, and positive thinking take a back seat, and the result is a low producing dysfunctional team.

Think about what happens to your lawn when it acquires a fungus that goes untreated. It spreads and becomes worse damaging the entire lawn. Perhaps you have experienced a small water leak that grew into a gusher causing major damage. Similarly, low producers and non-performers can destroy the morale and productivity of a whole team. Non-performance is contagious and spreads like a virus, making everyone on the team sick.

- The goal should be to save the individual and improve sales if possible. Intervention with training, coaching, planning and direction can be effective.

First, diagnose the reasons for the low production. Is it a skill issue, an attitude or belief issue, focus and planning issue, or a work ethic issue? Remember the formula for success is seeing the right people with the right frequency and doing the right things when in front of them.

- Accurately diagnose the problem by spending time with each underperformer. Investing two, three, or four days now will be a small investment compared to the time lost agonizing, whining, directing and coaching, recruiting and hiring, not to mention lost dollars in sales over the next several weeks and months. Do not second-guess or miss the importance of investing this time. The only way to know for sure is direct observation. In medical school, professors always tell medical students that reports are important, but “Look at the patient.” You should do the same.

Your gut reaction may be, “I don't want to micromanage,” Or “I don't have time for that.” Granted you may not want to micromanage, and you should not have to micromanage long term. Short term is a different story. It is acceptable, desirable, and the right thing to do. Help low performers get on the right track. Ferdinand Fournies, author of “Coaching for Improved Work Performance” writes that a major reason sales people do not do what they are supposed to do, is because they think they are doing what you want. Without direct observation, you can only guess.

- If consequences are appropriate, start with one or two oral reprimands for behavior issues and one or two coaching sessions for skill or attitude issues. Follow these with a written improvement plan specifying what they are to do, what you will do for support, a timeline, and a clearly defined result. Provide feedback on that written plan often, such as every week. If initial oral and written attempts are ineffective, consider steps that are more serious. Additional options are more training, suspension without pay, reduction in pay, demotion to a lower pay level, reassignment, or ultimate dismissal.

If the majority of your team is missing their target, your organization may have set overly optimistic sales goals. Compare effectiveness by using the team's average percent of quota, or average revenue per representative as a better measure of performance. Just like making a good stock analysis, remove outliers such as exceptionally large accounts and make adjustments for variances in potential by territory. For example, it may not be fair to compare the potential of western Kansas to Manhattan.

Field the strongest players possible and don't compromise on performance.

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