

Managing Performance

I can't do that

When you ask someone to do something and they tell you they can't, what do they really mean?

Let's imagine it's a member of your team. You ask them to do something and they respond "*I can't do that*". It may not be quite as direct as that "*Erm, I don't think I can do that...*". But the result is the same – a barrier

Of course, the words alone might miss some of the meaning. What does their tone suggest? Is it one of hesitation, or of indignation? What does their body language imply? Fear, frustration, disgust?

Find out what's prompted their reaction.

Is it merely an excuse due to a lack of willingness because they're not convinced it's worth the effort? Or do they genuinely mean that are not capable, due to skill or knowledge, or some other underlying reason?

There are potentially many reasons why.

"*I can't...*" might simply mean a lack of confidence, and they're in need of some reassurance, coaching or practice. Perhaps there are other skills that are a prerequisite, which they don't yet have. Or, worse they fear it will expose other weaknesses they feel they have.

"*I can't...*" could mean they haven't got all the resources they need. Maybe there's special equipment needed, or a budget they don't have. Perhaps they don't think they have the time, or know what they can leave out instead to make time.

"*I can't...*" may be because they've simply not been allowed to do this before. Old systems, processes or procedures have prevented them, and despite the fact you've moved on nobody as yet has set out the new 'rules', or demonstrated their faith in them to do it.

We mustn't dismiss the reason might be because they don't feel it's right; they don't believe it's the right solution for the situation, they might feel it's not their place to do it, or they might be concerned it's not ethical or just.

Why?

Whatever is behind it unless you understand why it can be difficult to move forward.

Simply asking directly "*Why can't you?*" could be seen as a criticism or confrontational, so may not be well received or give you the real reason.



A simple, but concerned "... Because?" might elicit the real reason, but check this isn't just be a stalling device or excuse.

So, if example they tell you they can't do it because they don't have enough time due to another project or task, you might respond with something along the lines of "*if we could re-gig your priorities and free up some time, what then?*" This will help to flush out if this is the real reason or just an excuse and if there is another underlying reason which they may be more reluctant to tell you.

So, when you hear comments such as "*I can't do that*", or "*we can't do that*" Look out for and listen for hesitation find out what's behind their response.

The person might do what you've asked but very reluctantly which will inevitably have consequences either in the quality of the task in question or on their long-term commitment and engagement. Or you accept the resistance and either do it yourself or someone else to do it.

Dealing with poor performance

Failure to do anything about poor performance sends the message to everyone else that it's OK to break the rules. We sometimes misguidedly believe that it's a one off or the problem will go away; but before you know it the problem has escalated - either the person in question continues to disregard the rule or standard, or it becomes custom and practice for everyone to follow suit.

So, **nip it in the bud** and address it straight away. This does not mean giving everyone a lecture in a group meeting - all this does it makes the 'non-offenders' irritated that they are all being 'accused', whilst those to whom you are aiming your comments either just laugh it off, or it goes by without them realising you are referring to them.

People need to know the rules and standards up front. Rules may be set by legislation, the business, the individual site or department or there may be the unwritten 'rules', standards or guidelines set by the individual team or line manager.

Whoever has set the 'rules' needs to ensure they are not only communicated, but check they are measurable and people understand why they are important. Any rules or standards laid down that you have difficulty explaining begs the question are they necessary? (OK, there may be some legislation we find difficult to explain at times, but any internal rules with no value should be reviewed and updated, or binned).

Of course, every business should have its own disciplinary process, and I am not going to go into those here. But, irrespective of the seriousness of the problem - whether it's someone being late, not greeting a customer in the way you'd expect, breaking health and safety rules, failure to carry out part of their job, arguing with another member of staff, or doing something in a haphazard way with a poor result - there are three phases to dealing with poor performance.

Your goal is to resolve the issue and improve performance in future.



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Establish the Gap

What is it they have done or failed to do? How does this compare with the standard or rules? What is the impact (actual or potential) of their actions? We should be focusing on actual behaviours - what we have seen or heard first hand.

It's very easy to haul someone into the office to take them up on something you've been told by someone else, only to have them deny their actions. So gather facts (opposed to hearsay, and others' perceptions and opinions). Be prepared to give specific examples, the more recent the better - so don't start dragging up something they did or said two months ago. (Remember the AID feedback model)

Avoid making judgments about their attitude or personality e.g. "I don't like your attitude", or "you are very arrogant". What have you **seen or heard** them do that has led you to that conclusion? Is there a genuine shortfall in standards of performance?

By focusing on their **actions and behaviours** you are less likely to get a defensive response and it is easier for people to identify what they need to change.

E

Explore the reasons for the gap

The only way to do this is to get the employee to talk the situation through by asking open-ended questions, and by listening.

There may be a number of legitimate reasons why someone has not performed to standard. Lack of resources, time pressures, insufficient training, bottlenecks in the system, mixed messages.

Everyone has a right to a fair hearing. However, do be prepared for the excuses - "Well Fred does it all the time and gets away with it", or "I don't see why that's a problem", "No one's ever told me that I had to do that".

Is this a genuine disciplinary problem or an indication that help is required? These last two responses suggest that some more explanation or training is needed, and you may need to draw a line in the sand and set out your expectations for the future.

Also consider if the problem is down to relationships, to get attention, a grievance, or a clash of personalities. Only by really understanding the reasons are we in a position to turn the situation around or prevent a reoccurrence.

E

Eliminate the gap

We said that the goal is to improve performance or prevent this happening again. This requires buy in and commitment from the other person.

In order to change, there needs to be some incentive. The fear of the disciplinary process may be enough, but it is hardly motivating! Nor is it any guarantee of a change in behaviour.



Understanding the reasons enables us to identify options, and to gain their buy in we need to ask the employee for their ideas on how to improve. Sometimes a simple "don't do it again" is all that is needed, but it may not be as simple as this.

For example: if the issue is poor timekeeping, but the reason is there is no bus that gets them into work in time for the start of their shift, the problem won't just go away! Can we change their shift times? Is there someone who passes who could give them a lift?

They may be a carer, or their partner / child is ill and cannot leave home until the nurse or help arrives. Without identifying these underlying reasons we're unlikely to see any sustained change.

Of course, the problem may be down to a flagrant disregard of the rules, in which case you must first help the employee to understand the impact of their behaviour. Homing in on the effect it has on his or her team mates, or the impact on customers, or the business may not be enough to get buy in. Focus on something that is important to **this individual** employee.

For example: making their job easier, being able to finish their shift on time, getting cooperation from their team mates, the opportunity to be considered for other roles, etc. The conversation needs to be tailored to suit the individual's motivators.

Agree on an improvement plan, and gain their commitment to improve. They may require some help from you or other members of the team. Agree **how and when** it will be monitored, as well as any **consequences** if there is no improvement. Finally show your **support and encouragement**. If you suggest or imply they can't or won't improve it generally becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Note: Keep dealing with poor performance separate from 6/12 months appraisals. An appraisal should be an opportunity to review the bigger picture and set goals for the future. Combining it with discussions on poor performance distracts from this. It's also tempting to delay a discussion on poor performance until the appraisal due date, rather than dealing with it **straight away**.

