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## **ARTICLE** **MANAGING PEOPLE**

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*by Liz Kislik*

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# Managing an Underperformer Who Thinks They're Doing Great

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ILLUSTRATION BY MARIA HERGUETA

Almost every leader has been in the uncomfortable position of managing someone who thinks their performance is terrific when it's actually just adequate, or worse. In fact, in my 30 years of consulting, it's been one of the more frequent — and draining — performance problems I've observed.

What causes the mismatch between these employees' real output and their perceptions of success? Some may not be receiving the resources and clear feedback they need to develop and improve; others may be unable to recognize that they're struggling. Whatever the cause, if leaders fail to address the situation, the lagging employee's work will not improve, and the organization will lose the value of a team member who could thrive if given the proper support. Perhaps a more insidious risk is that the leader will appear to condone substandard work, and competent employees may become demotivated and disengage. But if you can identify the likely cause of an underperformer's lack of self-awareness, these five approaches will help you correct the problem behaviors — or understand whether that's even possible.

**Be clear about expectations.** A nonprofit client had a congenial work environment and a cultural [commitment to understanding each other's needs](#). The board chair was exasperated by the lack of results from a particular VP, who believed she was doing fine because she was making an effort. The board chair reminded the VP's manager, a senior executive, that he was responsible for ensuring results. The manager reinforced performance objectives with the VP, but because he didn't want to blame her or hurt her feelings, didn't explain the harm to the organization or the fact that her job was in jeopardy. He continued to lose confidence in the VP and eventually reduced her duties as an indirect way of acknowledging her lack of progress. Both the board chair and the manager later acknowledged that no one had been direct enough with her about her performance problems.

**Provide employees with resources and support.** Most employees need leadership, mentoring, and strong supervision in order to develop, particularly if they're stepping into a function that's new to the company or are promoted to fill an absence in the organization. If their natural skills are insufficient to meet the requirements of their role and responsibilities, they may not even perceive what their deficits are.

A client company promoted a director to cover the gap left by the sudden departure of an executive two levels up. No one in the senior leadership evaluated the new director's development needs, despite the fact that he was suddenly responsible for large numbers of people performing varied jobs. The new [director assumed he was doing well](#) by virtue of the promotion. But because this more complex job couldn't be managed like his old one, the director became a burned-out micromanager, creating operating bottlenecks and severe employee dissatisfaction.

**Determine whether you're willing to continue investing in the individual.** If you're not, it's much more practical to reduce your expectations. In response to increasing frustration with a VP who consistently talked a great game but whose [results over several years were always just shy of their target](#), a CEO eventually reassigned some of the riskier and sexier aspects of the VP's job to another executive. The VP was offended, but stayed — and became more successful with the reduced scope of responsibilities.

**Assess whether they'll accept help.** It's emotionally draining to keep faking success or status that's not legitimate. In contrast to the people who experience [imposter syndrome](#), many others fall victim

to the [Dunning-Krueger effect](#), a cognitive bias that prevents people from recognizing how badly they're performing and that they need help. A mid-level administrator at a client organization bridled at the suggestion that his skills needed to improve and ignored the coaching that was offered to him. He found fault with everyone who questioned him and began setting up his colleagues, undercutting them, and misrepresenting their contributions and concerns. When these actions came to light, the business was forced to let him go.

**Target praise carefully.** When an employee with an inflated sense of their own performance delivers high-quality work or conducts an interaction well, it's important to praise them. But letting the praise stand alone can encourage them to think that *everything* they do is outstanding. Connect your positive comments to other things you want them to address. For example, you could say, "Now that you've done so well with the ABC presentation, for the next one, I'd like you to also [do the next thing they need to improve]. It's important because..." Make sure you're clear about both the necessary new behavior and why it's required as part of satisfactory job performance. They may still think too highly of themselves, but doing this gives you a better chance of getting the crucial behaviors you need.

Helping an unaware underperformer be more realistic about their work requires a lot of attention and involvement. Understanding what's driving their lack of awareness will either help you determine what support they need in order to improve, or confirm your assessment that they just might not be able to satisfy the requirements of the job.

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**Liz Kislik** helps organizations from the Fortune 500 to national nonprofits and family-run businesses solve their thorniest problems. She has taught at NYU and Hofstra University, and recently spoke at [TEDxBaylorSchool](#). You can receive her free guide, [How to Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts in the Workplace](#), on her website.

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