

Addressing Employee Underperformance

By Ed O'Neil, PhD, MPA

Underperformance in any situation is a complex and challenging issue for leaders to address. It is confounded when so many members of our teams are working virtually, which makes it a challenge to recognize the issue, assess the drivers causing the problem, and engage the employee in a positive and constructive conversation to develop a pathway for improvement. Below are some steps to take when you are leading virtually and need to address employee underperformance — most of these are just as relevant in person, too.

- 1. Understand, don't blame, and eschew emotions** — It is essential for you to have as full an understanding of the issue as possible before engaging about it. This may require you to talk with others, a bit on the oblique, to see if they share any general concerns. Be careful in this step. You are trying to develop a richer understanding of the situation and in so doing, avoid blaming the employee for the situation. By all means do not let an emotional position come to dominate your understanding of the situation before you have fully explored and engaged the employee in a discussion.
- 2. Engage sooner, not later** — This problem will not heal itself. The sooner you engage with the employee, the easier it will be for them and you — and their colleagues. When you first engage, be honest and direct, without being judgmental. Statements like, “You seem to have trouble finishing assignments in what I would consider a timely manner. Can we discuss this so I might understand and help?” can go a long way to quickly move the conversation forward. If you have had a long enough history to develop a supportive relationship with the person, it is time to build on that by raising this issue. If they are newer to the organization, and in this strange new world you may not have even met them in person yet, then you will want to strongly message the support and empathy for their situation as you enter the conversation. Messaging like, “This situation is really challenging for me and I would like to make sure that you know you can count on me as you learn how to master this work,” can help. Your job is to present the issue in a non-judgmental way and engage with them in problem solving. This will require you to use your very best [active listening skills](#) and to be fully present with them. During the conversation, you may want to also listen for keys to what motivates or de-motivates them, which will help in the remedy phase of the discussion. If your team is still working virtually, do not forget to fully recognize and account for this — though this is not an excuse to ignore the problem. Also, remember to fully appreciate that these strange times have created a host of psychological swirls around all of us. Let that shape your empathy.

About the Quick-Takes Series

This miniseries, part of the [Medicaid Leadership Exchange podcast](#), provides guidance to help Medicaid leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. The series, which includes companion videos and tip sheets, is developed in partnership with the National Association of Medicaid Directors and the Center for Health Care Strategies through support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information, visit www.chcs.org/quicktakes.

3. Develop remedies — There are many things that might be responsible for an employee’s underperformance. Identify them, then make a plan to address them during a conversation. A couple things to consider:

- Could the **expectations for quantity, quality, and timeliness** of work be clearer? Often with new employees, we may think we have been clear, but we probably left too many unstated expectations and beliefs in our mind, not theirs.
- Do they have the **skills** to actually carry out the task? You may think they do (or should), but do they have them at the level that is required to do the work? If not, what is the plan to remedy it?

As they work on new projects, they are almost certainly going to benefit from a **faster cycle of feedback** on tasks with smaller scopes than longer periods of no communication. This is particularly important for new employees, experienced employees who are working on novel undertakings, or individuals who are working in new settings or in a new context — so basically everyone these days. You should give shorter, faster, more focused feedback, both positive and constructive, to everyone these days. If for no other reason, to let them know that you are paying attention and that as the sand shifts constantly, they are on the right track.

4. Create a development plan — Hopefully, the employee already has a [general development plan](#) in place — including the newbie who started after sheltering-in-place orders. If not, now is the time to create one. The development plan should focus on actions to be taken by them and you following your conversation where you have reiterated your support for their success in the position, developed a shared understanding of the problem, and identified a plan for next steps. The plan should be as specific as possible, with clear assignments, accountabilities, and time to performance stated. It does not have to be elaborate, but must have input from both of you and be written and agreed upon with clear markers of success. It could be as informal as an email follow-up along these lines:

“I thought we had a good discussion today about the impact of working virtually on the time it takes to complete the invoice payment process. Thank you for sharing your perspectives that this has been severely impacted by working virtually. I think this is what we have agreed to, but please give me your feedback. First, let me be clear that you have full responsibility to engage with accounting to come up with alternative processes to our usual payment systems. You will keep me in the loop as these develop, but you have clear responsibility to go ahead and experiment with new procedures. We have agreed that these should be in place by June 20 and that if that changes you will let me know. After they are in place, you will run the new process for a week and then give me a report on processing time and expectations as we go forward. My expectations are that when this is completed, we will be able to get back to the standard processing time that existed prior to working virtually.”

This short and simple plan has clear goals, accountabilities, timelines, measurable outcomes, and it creates a shared sense of responsibility for those outcomes.

The current situation means there are new cracks for our co-workers to fall into — even those with years of experience and a track record of success. Make sure you help all of them be successful despite the current challenges arising from COVID-19 and working virtually.

About Ed O’Neil

Ed O’Neil, PhD, MPA, is the owner of O’Neil & Associates, a management consulting and leadership development firm focused on change and renewal in the health care system. He was previously professor in the Departments of Family and Community Medicine, Preventive and Restorative Dental Sciences, and Social and Behavioral Sciences at the University of California, San Francisco, and director of the Center for the Health Professions, a training institute that he created in 1992. His work across three decades has focused on changing the US health care system through improved policy and leadership. To learn more, visit www.oneil-and-associates.com.

About the National Association of Medicaid Directors

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About the Medicaid Leadership Institute

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