

Confronting The Underperforming Partner

by Patrick J. McKenna

I witness this same scenario play itself out, time after time, and we never seem to learn.

Imagine this: The practice group leader or managing partner has their attention drawn to the fact that one of our beloved partners is underperforming. This leader knew that the particular partner was underperforming. It didn't come as a shock. But they were content to let the situation drift without resolution, rather than have to confront the ugly reality of the circumstances. But today we have the facts thrust before us and now something must be done.

Our devoted leader, unaccustomed to having to deal with an interpersonal situation of this nature, makes a case for simply leaving the underperforming partner alone and instead sending this individual a message via the annual compensation review. The rationale is that by cutting this person's compensation they will quickly come to the realization that they had "better pick-up-their-socks and get with the program."

Given that we are dealing with rational people the leader's argument reaches sympathetic ears and after some months, the compensation adjustment is finally executed. No effort is ever made to fully explain the compensation adjustment or to inquire as to why this partner's performance has declined. Has work dried up in their area of practice? Are they experiencing some personal problems, perhaps afflicted with burnout? Are problems at home creating a distraction? All potentially temporary in nature and capable of being remedied. But no one bothers to ask, "what's going on here?"

LEARNING #1 – in an earlier era of lock-step compensation, if a partner was underperforming, it was quickly detected and resulted in someone discretely visiting with the individual to offer assistance to get him or her back on track. Today, when that happens, management simply abdicates their job under the guise of adjusting the individual's compensation.

Now our underperforming partner has had their annual compensation adjusted but after some months, there is still no change in performance. Did this underperforming partner really know that their performance had declined and was below expectations? Absolutely! I have never seen an instance where the individual was ignorant to the realities of their situation. Did this underperforming partner know what they should do to get their performance back on track? Who knows. Not likely. And, certainly, nobody has bothered to ask thus far.

Well, this situation continues to fester for some protracted period of time, sometimes for years (unfortunately) until someone in a leadership position finally (hopefully), decides that maybe they should talk to this partner. So a one-on-one meeting is scheduled.

Now because this situation has been allowed to drag on for a prolonged period of time, it can be far more difficult for our underperforming partner to take the kind of remedial action that might have delivered results, had the discussion happened when the underperformance was first detected.

LEARNING #2 – difficult personnel or performance decisions never get better with age

Nevertheless, our persistent leader sits down with the underperformer and points out the issue and asks the partner “what’s going on here?” The partner now recognizing that they are facing a time of reckoning, at some point will inquire of the leader (guaranteed!) the natural question, “what do you think I should do to get my performance back on track?”

Our naive leader, in an attempt to be of help and offer some genuine guidance, now outlines a number of alternatives that this underperforming partner might want to think about doing. The partner picks one of the alternatives, the leader is delighted to see that action is being taken, and everyone goes back to their office to let the situation percolate . . . for another year.

A year goes by, the performance has not improved and another sit-down is scheduled. Our leader asks the underperforming partner what happened. The partner responds, “I did exactly what you suggested, but it didn’t seem to work for me.” (Interpretation: It was your idea Mr. practice leader and now it is your problem, not mine. I tried what you wanted me to do, but it didn’t work.)

LEARNING #3 – who really owns this problem, or – who’s got the monkey?

It reminds me of an article written in the Harvard Business Review many years ago wherein the author asked his readers to imagine, that every time one of their people has a problem, issue or challenge to deal with, to imagine that problem as a monkey sitting on their shoulder. His message was that the next words out of your mouth will quickly determine who *owns* that monkey.

In other words while you may, as a practice leader, want to be of help to your partner and indeed that is your highest value activity, by taking ownership of your partner’s problem you have actually hindered their development.

WHAT TO DO

Step One: Confront the partner’s underperformance problem as quickly as possible.

Have a one-on-one discussion with the individual to identify the underperformance. Do not let the situation fester. It will be far harder to deal with a few months down the road and far more difficult to resolve in a satisfactory manner.

Step Two: Listen persuasively

Listening persuasively is the ability to ask questions to help your partner come to his or her own conclusions. Ask lots of questions, seek to understand what’s going on, and help your partner think through their various options. The key question you need to pose is: “So what do you think **you** need to do to resolve this issue?”

Step Three: Invite your partner to identify a sequential plan of action

Do not volunteer your ideas of what you think your partner needs to do. Rather inquire of your partner, what specifically they are going to do, and by what dates, to turn around their

situation. And if they don't know? Invite them to think about whom within the firm (or outside of the firm) they might want to confer with to get some ideas. But leave the ownership for developing a remedial course of action with the partner affected.

Step Four: Offer your assistance by scheduling frequent follow-up meetings.

Help your partner by determining with them what they are expecting to do and accomplish, by what dates. Set frequent, at least every second month, review sessions with your partner to check in on their progress. Encourage them to maintain their focus and help celebrate small successes.

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