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Managing poor performance

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Are individual members of your team under-performing, not doing what you have asked of them and not delivering what is expected of them? Do you find yourself dreading having to address their poor performance?

Dealing with poor performance is something that many people struggle with but as an RVN it is something that may be required of your role. I advocate taking a two-pronged approach:

- Understand your strengths and weaknesses when communicating with others
- develop a plan and a structure for assessing and managing the performance concerns

It is essential to identify your own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to managing the performance of others. Do you have a lack of confidence in your ability to manage people? Alternatively, do you find discussing poor performance with others too confrontational? Do you feel that people just don't listen to you when you try to direct them during the course of the day? How do you feel when you are giving performance feedback, which areas are easier for you, which do you find harder? Reflecting on the answers to these questions can provide the answers to what holds you back from dealing with confrontation/performance issues in the first place.

Understanding yourself and your colleagues

As a RVN your role may require you to lead and be led, to manage others and to be an integral team player; many hats to wear on a daily basis! Managing these

roles requires effective communication, to communicate what needs to be done and to provide performance feedback. I believe the key to doing this role well is firstly to understand what your communication style is, the impact your behaviour has on others as well as the personalities of those you are working with. Understanding others is something you can do if you have lots of time to get to know your team but more often than not we don't have the time and yet the work needs to get done. So what can we do?

DiSC Behavioural Profiling

There is always a reason for our own behaviour and that of others – it's important that we recognise what drives our own behaviour as well as that of each member of the team to understand their strengths and weaknesses and importantly understand how to manage challenging situations in practice, such as conflict, confrontation and change (situations many nurses find challenging). DiSC behavioural profiling improves self-awareness and gives an insight to what drives your behaviour, why you find certain tasks easier and others more challenging. It enables you to draw on your strengths in order to tailor and choose the most appropriate approach to get the best out of both yourself and others.

DiSC behavioural profiling was created by William Marston in 1927 and it describes the factors that drive our normal behaviour in different environments and contexts such as at work, under pressure and at home. It is used to identify a variety of traits such as whether we are more outgoing or reserved in nature and if we are more task or people orientated. These factors are categorised to form the 4 different styles (DiSC) (**Box 1**).

Box 1.

Do you know someone who is assertive, likes to be in control, to the point and focused on the results? Some people are dominant, direct and strong-willed. They are examples of D Style

D = Dominance, Challenge

Do you have colleagues who are engaging and great communicators? Some people are optimistic, friendly and talkative. They are examples of I Style

I = Influencing, Relationships

Do you have team members who are good listeners and great team players? Some people are steady, patient, loyal and practical. They are examples of the S Style

S = Steadiness, Consistency

Have you ever worked with someone who enjoys gathering facts and details and is always thorough? Some people are precise, sensitive and analytical. They are examples of the C Style

C = Compliance, Constraints

DiSC behavioural profiling is now available as an online tool to help you understand yourself and others deeply, quickly and accurately. Not only will it give you an understanding of why you do what you do, but it will also give you the tools to motivate and engage others (which you will see later on is a key part of dealing with poor performance).

You need to have a flexible communication style in order to get the best out of others and understand not only which buttons to push, but also which buttons to stay well away from when managing their performance!

Understanding yourself and your team is essential if you are to manage, lead and motivate them effectively. This understanding of self and others will also help you provide effective feedback and lead a productive, high-performing team. DiSC profiling enables you to achieve this.

Understanding poor performance

Before you can fix a problem you need to understand it. Does the poor performance come from lack of ability or lack of motivation? If you misdiagnose the problem it can be a disaster for example, increasing the pressure to perform on an individual may work if the initial problem is a lack of motivation, but a similar approach to someone

who lacks the ability to perform more effectively can make the problem worse.

Lack of ability

Poor ability is often associated with:

- overly difficult tasks
- low individual aptitude, skill and knowledge
- evidence of strong effort despite poor performance
- lack of improvement over time

If you recognise these signs you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Are the person's skills equally matched to their job role, or have they been promoted without any additional training and are now out of their comfort zone?
- Has the structure of the workplace or team changed so that they no longer have the support that previously helped them to perform well? An example of this is losing a nurse from the team and roles being juggled around to 'hold the fort'. Nurses are moved into roles, to fill the gaps, but do they really know what is required from them in their new position?

Strategies for maximising performance-improving ability

There are five key ways to overcome performance problems associated with low ability and all of them start with an open, honest conversation. Have a one-to-one meeting with the staff member and present your concerns to them, check they understand what their role involves, ask them what has prevented them doing what is required of them, and find out what is required to improve their performance in the future. Work with them rather than against them to improve the situation. Then consider which of the 5 strategies below would work best for the situation.

Re-supply

Focus on the resources provided to do the job. Ask the individual what is working and what is lacking, what do they find frustrating and what solutions would help them do the job properly? By questioning in this way you show that you are listening to their needs and ideas to improve the situation: demonstrating that you are interested in their perspective and value their opinion.

Re-train

Understand the team's different roles and explore where learning gaps are by ensuring

that you have an idea of the skills needed. Get your team to mark off the ones they already have and identify the areas they need to work on. Again, the time you invest in this exercise will make people feel valued and stimulated to close the knowledge gap.



Re-fit

If the previous two steps have not worked, consider re-fitting the job role to the person – can some elements be allocated to another member of the team? If the individual is right for your team, rearranging jobs to complement skills is a good way to improve everyone's performance.

Re-assign

If reorganising the job doesn't turn the situation around but you want to keep the individual in your team, think about re-assigning the job role to reduce the demands on the individual. This can be done by reducing:

- Individual levels of responsibility
- a particular job profile's technical requirements

Make sure the reassignment isn't perceived as a demotion, keep the job challenging and stimulating so it's seen as a sideways move to fit the individual's skills better, rather than a downward one. If the level of responsibility is now lower and is associated with reduced remuneration it is essential to clearly and openly discuss the details and the situation so both the practice and the individual's needs are met.

Release

As a final option you may need to let the team member go – if they are unable to perform the tasks that the role requires of them, the situation isn't good for the individual, for you or for the rest of your team.

If the team is continually carrying someone, this is damaging for morale, motivation, engagement and ultimately for productivity.

Low motivation and disengagement

If the poor performance is due to low motivation/disengagement then you will need to tackle the problem differently. As an RVN and a leader and manager of others, part of your role is to provide a motivating and engaging work environment for your team. If this isn't the case you need to ask yourself and others what's missing? (Box 2)

Box 2.

The three things that motivate individuals are

1. **Purpose:** Ensure that each team member knows their role, what is required of them and how what they do fits into the bigger picture
2. **Autonomy:** A sense of control will engage and motivate the team; find out what each wants from their job and look at how you can help achieve this.
3. **Development and mastery:** What training and development are required? We all want to get better at what we do – in doing so we feel a sense of achievement and fulfilment in our work.

Set performance goals

Goal setting is an important element in improving any aspect of our personal and professional lives. Work with the individual to help them recognise where they are now and what their aspirations are, then identify the steps they need to take to close the gap.

Provide performance assistance

Once you have identified and agreed goals, help each individual succeed by:

- holding regular sessions to assess progress – identify what's not working if progress isn't as expected
- provide necessary training and resources
- encourage co-operation and assistance from other team members

Provide performance feedback

People need feedback on their progress in order to know where they are and

understand what they need to do in the future to improve. It's important not to get bogged down in what has gone wrong, but rather to identify what can be done in the future to improve performance (Box 3).



Box 3.

Key elements of providing feedback include:

- **Timeliness:** Provide feedback as soon as possible – make sure there is enough time and it's the right environment to discuss the matter properly, not squeezing it in between consults, lab runs and pharmacy orders!
- **Openness and honesty:** Make sure feedback is accurate – only report on things you have witnessed yourself or which come from a credible source. Providing inaccurate feedback is a sure way to disengage and demotivate your team members.
- **Understand how to communicate with each member of the team:** Some individuals prefer to focus on results, others on details; whilst some will be more interested in how their performance affects the team and others on how it impacts on them. This is where having a knowledge of individual DiSC profiles proves invaluable.

Always ensure that you:

- Meet with each individual regularly so that you can review progress
- Ask questions such as 'What's working well' and 'What's not working well' to encourage reflection on progress and identify areas for further improvement

- Remember to write down what you have agreed
- Set the next date for your review
- Monitor progress between review sessions

- Concentrate on providing an environment that motivates everyone

Conclusion

The main causes of poor performance in a nursing team – lack of ability and lack of motivation – are intertwined; we need to understand the root of the problem before we can effectively address it. Combined strategies that address both issues through goal-setting, feedback, understanding the individual's communication style and providing support will create an environment in which everyone feels valued and understands that you, as their manager/leader, have a genuine interest in helping them succeed.

As long as you have given performance enhancement your best effort – working with the individual to identify the cause of poor performance and intervening in order to improve the situation – you can feel confident that you are making the right decision if you do then need to let them go.

Remember, the most important resources for your team are the people who work in it. As an RVN you play a key role in your practice in providing a motivating environment, addressing issues as they arise and working with others in the nursing team to get the best out of them by engaging them and inspiring them to reach their full potential.