

## Managing chronic underperformance has "insidious" impact on leaders

Monday, 18 September 2023 12:22pm

It's natural to find managing underperforming employees difficult, but in some cases leaders start to let their emotions "tinge" their interactions with revenge, a psychologist warns.

According to Global Leadership Wellbeing Solutions ([GLWS](#)) cofounder **Audrey McGibbon**, the importance of schooling leaders to manage underperformance and have difficult conversations is widely recognised and attended to, but the impact on the leader of having to do this repeatedly in the case of chronic underperformers is not well-investigated at all.

The fact leaders are known to have a significant influence on employee engagement and wellbeing can "add insult to injury", by making them feel additional pressure to "lift their leadership game" to help an underperforming employee, even when that employee seems unwilling to make efforts to improve, she says.

And it means that while the leader's impact on a struggling employee might be closely monitored, a struggling employee's impact on their leader might be completely overlooked.

### Draining, frustrating, risky

It doesn't take an expert to realise that managing a troublesome employee or a chronic underperformer can have a detrimental impact on a leader's wellbeing, McGibbon says. "It takes a lot of time. It's physically draining. It can be frustrating."

In cases where poor performance doesn't warrant sacking but does require repeated attention over a long period of time, it can also change the way the leader treats the employee, in ways that leave the leader feeling guilty and conflicted.

"Over time, a leader might start to engage in what's officially called 'abusive leadership', which is a pretty-full on academic term," McGibbon tells HR Daily.

In a situation where the leader has reached their threshold of frustration and the employee makes a benign request – for example for the next Friday off – the leader might say "no" without even considering it.

This kind of instinctive retaliation might sound trivial, but if a leader whose identity is wrapped up in the way they treat their people continues to slip up like this, they might end up struggling to look at themselves in the mirror.

"What's happened is, over time, they've started to almost mimic some of the behaviours that are associated with poor performance," McGibbon says.

It means the leader ends up suffering on two levels. First there's the extra time, emotional energy, stress and frustration that's gone into dealing with the employee's behaviour. Then, as a result of their own "low-grade abusive behaviours" – behaviours that might appear reasonable on the surface but don't conform to their own high standards – their view of themselves is diminished.

The good news is that intervention from HR can make a world of difference. It starts with building some awareness around the risk, McGibbon says.

"So the HR person would be saying: 'Yes, the underperformance issue needs to be dealt with and we need to work that through. What I have some concerns about is how to help you manage your stresses through this, because there is a known risk that you can end up, if not hating yourself, then certainly feeling pretty bad about yourself if, over time, the effects of this have an insidious impact on the way that you're behaving'."

They could then move on to some advice assistance to ensure the leader is aware of and able to regulate their own emotional state when interacting with the employee, and afterwards.



Audrey McGibbon, GLWS

## Acknowledging emotion versus being emotional

Trying to avoid being emotional doesn't mean the leader should completely shield the employee from what they're feeling, McGibbon says.

But the distinction between acknowledging emotion and being emotional is an important one.

In some cases it will help for a leader to tell an employee how they've been feeling: "This is the twelfth conversation this month around being late for meetings. I have to tell you, I'm getting really, really, really fed up."

They might even say that when they were thinking about having the conversation, they felt mad, then say: "I'm not mad now. But the impact you're having, being late repeatedly, is taking its toll on me and your colleagues."

Some might say the leader should be striving to be objective by sticking to the facts. But in McGibbon's view, what would be "really helpful", is for the leader to view their emotional reaction as a fact.

Emotions are a chemical response to "what our brain is telling us we're seeing and thinking", she explains, so it might make sense to share them with an employee.

The emotion might not be anger, she notes. It might be sadness. The manager might tell the employee they're upset because their attempts to help someone they "adore as a person" seem ineffective, and are making them feel helpless themselves.

"I don't know what the legal position is on that. But from my psychologist's perspective, that's a *much* higher-quality conversation that is more likely to result in a change."

## Getting the timing right

Leaders should avoid saying this sort of thing at the time they're feeling it, McGibbon says. "That's the golden rule."

If emotion flares up in the meeting, the manager is right to suppress it and cut the meeting short. "That's your amygdala hijack. And so one of the things that we could train leaders in is helping them to recalibrate after."

There are many techniques for this, she adds, singling out **Susan David's** [work on emotional agility](#) and being able to access and describe emotions.

If a leader is able to step back, examine their emotion, and get some perspective, they might come to frame the situation as petty and low-grade.

"It's like, initially I was livid, but I realised this is just a tiny thing," McGibbon says. It's the fact it happens "100 times a month" that makes it overwhelming.

Succumbing to emotion once or twice isn't going to harm someone, she says. But if it continues it won't just impact the leader's view of themselves, it will change how others see them.

"They'll see this really great manager who's ordinarily lovely, is actually behaving in a way that isn't very, maybe, fair or respectful or professional to one person.

"As the manager, you're in the higher-status position. You're the role model, and if you don't want to feel bad about yourself... be wary when people bring out the worst in you."

**Do you have news to share about your workplace? [Email the HR Daily team](#) with your comments, information or tips.**

## Related links

- ➔ [Webcast: Effective performance feedback](#)
- ➔ [Work addiction "dangerous" and prevalent: psychologist](#)
- ➔ [Psychological safety fuels high performance with "integrated approach"](#)
- ➔ [Five steps build leaders' "conversation competence"](#)
- ➔ ["Exasperation" with employee no foundation for summary dismissal](#)
- ➔ [Relationships and clarity key to unlocking team performance](#)