

Performance Issues vs Role Mismatch: How to Tell the Difference

When an employee underperforms, the default assumption is often that the person is the problem. More effort. More pressure. More monitoring. But in many cases, what looks like a performance issue is actually a role mismatch.

Misdiagnosing the problem doesn't just hurt the employee—it drains manager time, lowers morale, and increases attrition.

The key is knowing how to tell the difference early.

What a True Performance Issue Looks Like

A performance issue exists when an employee clearly understands the role, has the necessary skills, and receives adequate support—but still fails to meet expectations.

Common indicators include:

- Repeated errors despite coaching
- Missed deadlines even with clear priorities
- Resistance to feedback
- Lack of accountability or follow-through

In these cases, the issue is not capability—it's behaviour, consistency, or motivation.

Addressing it requires direct feedback, structured improvement plans, and clear consequences.

Performance issues need correction, not role changes.

What a Role Mismatch Looks Like

Role mismatch occurs when expectations, skills, or strengths don't align with the job—often through no fault of the employee.

Signs of role mismatch include:

- High effort with low output
- Confusion about priorities despite asking questions
- Strengths that don't match core job requirements
- Improvement in some areas but persistent struggle in key responsibilities

These employees are often willing, engaged, and stressed. They try harder—but don't get better.

Pressure won't fix a mismatch. Alignment will.



Key Questions to Diagnose the Difference

Before labeling someone as underperforming, leaders should ask:

1. Is the role clearly defined?

If expectations shift frequently or success metrics are vague, performance cannot stabilize.

2. Does the employee have the required skills?

Not potential—actual, demonstrated skills for the role today.

3. Is the environment enabling success?

Poor onboarding, unclear processes, or lack of authority can mimic poor performance.

4. Do their strengths match the role's demands?

Someone strong in execution may struggle in a strategy-heavy role—and vice versa.

Honest answers reveal the real issue.

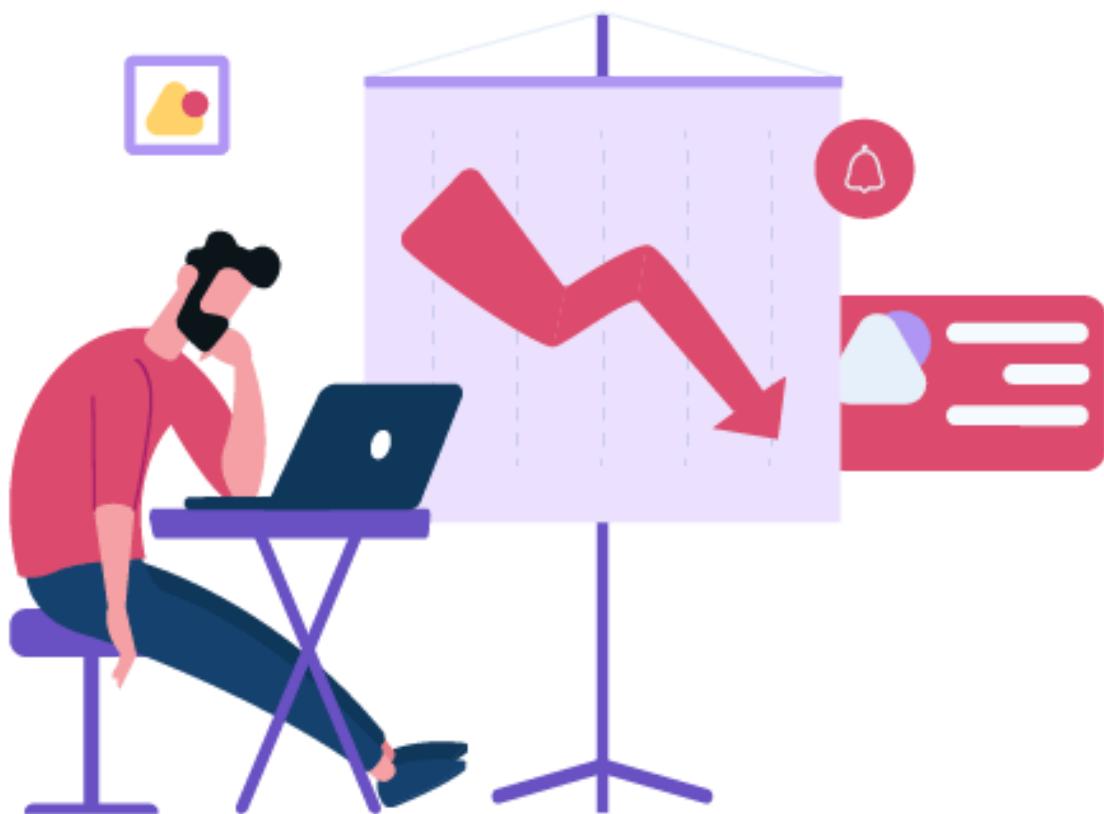
Why the Difference Matters

Treating role mismatch as poor performance leads to disengagement, burnout, and early exits. Treating poor performance as role mismatch lowers standards and frustrates high performers.

Both mistakes are costly.

The right diagnosis allows leaders to:

- Reassign or redesign roles where needed
- Coach performance issues effectively
- Retain capable employees
- Build stronger teams through better alignment



Performance improves when people are placed where they can succeed.

Before asking, "Why isn't this person performing?"

Ask, "Is this the right role for them?"

That single shift in thinking saves talent, time, and trust.

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