

# **How to Lead Teachers to Become Great**

It's All About Student Learning

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C H A P T E R

## **Tactic 1:** Hold High, Middle, and Low Performer Conversations with Teachers

### **Why Tactic 1 Is Important**

One important lesson we've taken from Studer Group's® research of healthcare organizations is that moving low performers up or out of an organization heavily influences whether it can move from bad to good, good to great, or sustain greatness. In fact, Quint Studer himself deemed this realization so important that he covered it in the first chapter of his book *Results That Last*, which examines how to deal with high, middle, and low performers. (It should be noted that in his bestselling book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins also stresses the importance of dealing with low performers. He does so in his chapter about getting the right people on the bus and the wrong ones off.)

We hear leaders constantly saying that their job is to get everyone on board with the company's organizational goals. But for many of them, it's just lip service. Studer Group has uncovered the truth, and it may be surprising to some. Their research shows evidence that it is actually impossible to get every single person within an organization on board.

The same holds true for learning institutions seeking to improve performance. School leaders simply cannot expect to get every single one of their teachers on board. That's why they must learn to properly deal with low performers. As we alluded to earlier, Marzano's research has shown the detrimental effect a low performing teacher can have on student learning. Schools cannot afford to have low performing teachers in classrooms.

Let's take a look at Studer Group's findings regarding measuring performance within organizations. The good news is that about 92 percent of employees in the typical organization *do* want to be on board. Other good news is that 34 percent of people in an organization are high performers, while 58 percent are middle performers who desire to improve their performance. The bad news is that leaders must spend the majority of their time on the 8 percent who are low performers.

Research also shows that when the low performing 8 percent are confronted about their behavior, one-third of them choose to change their performance and one-third choose to leave the organization. The remaining one-third choose to stay in the organization until the leader follows the process for removing them when they, inevitably, continue to underperform.

The bottom line? To provide teachers with a great place to work and students with a great place to learn, school leaders must learn how to deal with their low performers. Naturally, this process takes time and hard work that includes well-defined and consistent practices. But it's well worth the effort. High and middle performing teachers deserve leaders who have time to address their needs rather than leaders who are bogged down with problems caused by the low performing 8 percent. And more attentive leaders is what they'll get, if low performing teachers are managed properly.

To get the best student results, an organization should be made up of high and middle performers who are constantly learning and are constantly supported by school leaders. Throughout a teaching career, there are many ups and downs. As a result, people move in and out of middle and high performer roles. One of the key responsibilities for school leaders is to recognize when this movement has occurred with one of their teachers so that the leader can provide the support the teacher needs to help her constantly improve.

Without appropriate and meaningful professional development and training, teachers struggle to move from low to middle and middle to high performer levels. And top performers become frustrated when they want to learn but have little support from school leaders.

So, how exactly should low performers be dealt with? Let's take a look.

To begin, let us dispel a popular myth right off the bat. We hear leaders in schools and teachers preparing to be leaders in our college classes say, "You can't fire a teacher. The union protects them." Not true. Unions expect school leaders to provide specific feedback and training to help teachers improve their

professional lives underachieving. They are good at being low performers, and, in many instances, they outlast leaders.

One way to reduce the number of low performers at your school is not to hire more into the organization. We hear, "Sure, but I don't always have that option because I need a warm body in the classroom with kids." Low performing "warm bodies" are the wrong bodies to have in classrooms with students. By allowing low performers to stay on board, schools are neglecting students, their parents, and teachers. (For a look at the hiring practices that help schools hire middle to high performing teachers, see Chapter 2!)

## How to Apply Tactic 1

Teachers expect leaders to know them, what they are good at, and what they value in an organization. The performance level of the teacher should direct the type of performance conversation a leader has with him or her. *Results That Last* provides some meaningful recommendations for holding conversations with high, middle, and low performers. It also suggests that leaders hold conversations with high performers first and low performers last to show that leaders value the high performers.

In a school setting, high performers share the school values, know how to problem solve, and serve as good mentors for other teachers. In conversations with high performers, a leader should cover where the organization is going, thank the teacher for her work, outline why the teacher is important to the school, and ask the teacher what kind of support she needs from him.

Middle performers are the backbone of the organization and usually determine a school's success or failure. Most new teachers come into our schools as middle performers in the classroom and need immediate support in order to transition into high performers. Middle performing teachers know how to identify problems and bring them to the leader's attention to be solved. They also don't mind solving problems when they are given some direction and support.

Middle performer conversations should flow in the following way: Tell the teacher that he is important to the school. Then, share ONE area for the teacher to work on to improve. The leader ends the meeting letting the teacher

performance. They also expect school leaders to document poor performance if it continues after a teacher has received proper guidance and training to help her improve her performance. But in our work with local unions and through reviewing Studer Group's work with healthcare unions, we have learned that they tend to not want to protect employees who choose to continue low performer behaviors.

When school leaders look in a low performing teacher's file, they tend to see "good to very good" or sometimes "excellent" evaluations. On a 5-point scale, we see low performing teachers receiving mostly 4s and 5s. It's in these situations, when a low performer hasn't been properly evaluated by school leaders, that the union tends to protect him or her.

Within any organization—school, business, or otherwise—low performance is never a contained problem. When low performers are not dealt with properly, high and middle performing teachers find it difficult to maintain or improve their own performance levels. They deserve better. School leaders must document performance and terminate low performing teachers who fail to improve.

School leaders have a responsibility to their students as well. Low performing teachers can cause students to lose as much as two years of learning. School leaders must enumerate very specific expectations for their low performing teachers, support them with additional training, continuously monitor their performance, and encourage them to shift from being a low performing teacher to a middle performing one. (Tactics 5 through 14 guide school leaders through the type of training and support teachers need to move from low to middle and middle to high performer levels and to keep high performers excelling.)

Low performers get their energy when they successfully do two things. First, in order to recruit more naysayers, they strive to pull middle performers down to low performer levels. Second, they force high performers out. What usually happens is high performers become frustrated with leaders not dealing with low performers and eventually choose to leave to find a better school environment. Or if leaving isn't an option, they give up on being the best teachers they can be and find other avenues outside of school through which they can be high performers.

One of the few things low performers are good at is exactly that: low performance. In fact, they're masters at it. They have usually spent most of their

know she is committed to his success and asks if she can do anything to help him with the area of improvement discussed.

Low performers drain the energy out of their coworkers and leaders as they attempt to keep the organization from achieving the desired results. Low performing teachers love to recruit new and middle performing teachers into their low performing camp. Their reasoning? The more low performers there are the easier it will be for them to disguise their behaviors. And covered up bad behavior means they can last longer in the organization.

Now for the low performers. *Results That Last* describes several survival skills low performers demonstrate. First, they tend to blame others for their low performance. They point their finger at leadership for not providing them with the necessary training to do a good job. Or, they unload a personal problem with coworkers or leaders to divert attention away from their performance. Generally, everyone knows who the low performers are in an organization—everyone, that is, except for the low performers themselves.

There are two important keys to ensuring that low performer conversations lead to success. First, before beginning these conversations, leaders should lay the groundwork with their bosses so that everyone in the administration is on the same page. Second, after the initial low performer conversation with a teacher, a leader must follow up relentlessly. The teacher is counting on the lack of follow-up so that her continued low performance can go unnoticed and so that she can continue her influence on middle performing teachers.

Low performer conversations can be difficult. That's why Studer created the DESK approach. The approach provides leaders with a guide to get them through these difficult conversations and helps them cut right to the chase. And before you begin, keep in mind that conversations with low performers should never start on a positive note or with casual conversation. Instead, leaders should:

Describe what has been observed.

Evaluate how they feel.

Show what needs to be done.

Know and share the consequences of continued low performance.

Let's look at an example. Meet Ms. Heinz and Ms. Aaron. Ms. Heinz is a veteran teacher at Jackson Branch Elementary School who enters each day with

an infectiously negative attitude and who likes to control leaders. In fact, she successfully controlled the former leader of the school. As a result, that leader was placed in another school and recently Ms. Aaron became the new principal at Jackson Branch. Her marching orders: Turn the school around. Pronto!

It doesn't take long before Ms. Aaron discovers that Ms. Heinz is part of the school's problem, so she schedules a meeting with her. To ensure a successful conversation, she'll use the DESK approach during the meeting. Here's how it plays out:

Ms. Heinz enters Ms. Aaron's office and Ms. Aaron asks her to take a seat. She begins:

**Describe what has been observed:**

Ms. Heinz, as you know, every month I ask teachers to provide the student results from their 30-Day Plans. Last month you failed to report that information. At our last meeting, you informed me that you would do so this month. When I reviewed this month's 30-day student results reports, I noticed that you again failed to submit the information.

**Evaluate how they feel:**

Ms. Heinz, as a school we analyze these results each month to make sure our students are progressing and to identify learning gaps that need to be addressed. Your failure to report the information is placing our students in jeopardy.

**Show what needs to be done:**

Next Monday I would like for us to meet after school. I will review with you the proper procedure for completing 30-Day Plans and reporting their results. I will then give you a report to complete at the end of each week. And we will meet every Monday for a month so that I am sure that you understand clearly how to complete the 30-day student reports and document their results. I expect you to turn in the weekly information and meet with me each week. I also expect you to turn in your 30-day student results reports each month.

**Know and share the consequences of continued low performance:**

Ms. Heinz, consider this your verbal warning. If you fail to complete the steps I've laid out or you fail to turn in any of the year's remaining 30-day student results reports, you will receive a written warning. Ms. Heinz, to make sure that we have a common understanding, give me a summary of what you have heard and what is expected of you.

If Ms. Heinz is a skilled low performer, she will likely try to give Ms. Aaron excuses or even blame Ms. Aaron for her behavior. But the conversation could be just the push she needed to see the light. She may then decide to turn things around, to modify her actions and become a more valuable member of the school team.

We find that most teachers change their negative behaviors and actions when a leader confronts rather than ignores their low performer behaviors. The bottom line is that low performers must be confronted. Ignoring their negative actions will not make the issues go away. Even worse, when leaders ignore poor performance and unproductive behaviors, the school becomes a breeding ground for low performance.

As mentioned before, follow-up in this scenario will be key. One failure to follow up puts Ms. Heinz back in a position to repeat her negative behavior. If Ms. Heinz continues to perform poorly, Ms. Aaron needs to immediately address the behaviors, offer and provide support to change the behaviors, and then follow up with Ms. Heinz again.

Ms. Heinz will make one of three decisions: 1) Choose to change her behavior, 2) Leave the school, or 3) Continue with her same actions. If this behavior and others continue, it may be time for Ms. Aaron to consider termination.

Throughout this process, Ms. Aaron should also be documenting these conversations as well as Ms. Heinz's subsequent improvement or continuing low performance. She should also be working with her immediate supervisor to keep him informed of the problem. To successfully deal with low performers, upper management must be on board. Their support will be essential if indeed the time comes that a school leader recommends dismissing a low performing teacher.

Of course at any time during this process, Ms. Heinz could go to the union to file a grievance. If this happens, Ms. Aaron can present the

documentation of the meetings, required actions, support and training provided, and the follow-up with Ms. Heinz.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, relax. Remember, only about 8 percent of employees in an organization are low performers, and most of them will improve or change negative behaviors to positive ones after they are addressed by a leader.

For a little inspiration, here's a story with a winning outcome: Every summer we administer teacher academies for new teachers in high need schools. In one of our academies of 30 teachers, we had three who qualified as low performers. One teacher did not think she needed to attend because she believed she already knew most everything that the others were learning. We pointed out to her that, often, low performing teachers are the ones who fail to recognize a good learning opportunity. Because we called her out on her negative behavior, she reflected on her actions. She decided to become a more reflective learner and to be more engaged with her team of teachers.

During the same academy, two other teachers sat together with seemingly little interest in learning. You could say they were there in body but not in spirit. They wanted to attend so they could check a box indicating they attended the academy and receive the resulting pay. However, one of the two teachers completed an assignment that demonstrated excellent work. We shared her great work with the group. And that simple act of recognition spurred both teachers into action. They both became more engaged and better performers.

The psychology behind the turnaround is basic. Being recognized as having done something "good" made the teacher feel worthwhile. Her teaching partner saw how feeling worthwhile helped her colleague become better. As a result, both changed their approach to learning. When all was said and done, they had both produced excellent work in the academy—great work that translated into improving their teaching practices. Most importantly, they recharged their love for teaching.

Great leaders can achieve similar results in organizations in all industries. By simply taking the proper steps to address low performers and encouraging them to change their behavior through a structured approach, great leaders can turn these "problem" employees into middle and high performers. And though it's hard work, the improved learning environment will be better for all.