

Feedback

When Your Boss Labels You a Poor Performer — But You're Not

by Mita Mallick

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Summary. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the estimated cost of a poor performer can be at least 30% of the employee's first-year expected earnings. That number comes as no surprise considering poor performers might make serious errors, not show up to work... [more](#)

“We will be downgrading your role,” my former boss told me over the phone. “It’s clear to me that the lights are on, and nobody’s home. You aren’t making any impact in this job anymore.”

As I pushed for specific feedback, he couldn't provide any. I had been given the highest performance rating the previous year, and suddenly I was being labeled a poor performer. I was presented with two options: I could backfill someone on maternity leave in a role outside my department that didn't align with my career vision. Or I could be put on a performance improvement plan and ultimately forced out of the company.

Then two weeks later, George Floyd was murdered. And suddenly, as the head of diversity, equity, and inclusion, I became one of the most valuable leaders in the company. I later found out that my boss had wanted to downgrade my role in search of cost savings for the department and had no maternity leave backfill for the other role. Labeling me a poor performer solved two key issues for him and the company.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the estimated cost of a poor performer can be at least 30% of the employee's first-year expected earnings. That number comes as no surprise considering poor performers might make serious errors, not show up to work consistently, damage customer relationships with poor interactions, waste their boss's time, or negatively affect retention on their teams.

No one wants to be told they're performing poorly, but it does happen for legitimate reasons. But what if you haven't done any of those things and are still being told you're not meeting expectations? Being labeled a poor performer can negatively impact your reputation within your company, your ability to continue to do your job, and your self-confidence. Here are four actions to take if you think you're being mislabeled.

Know your wins.

It's time to start advocating for yourself. If your boss says your performance isn't up to par, be ready to defend your performance by pointing to your successes.

Have a list of key initiatives you've been driving, including the most up-to-date progress and metrics you can speak to. Also be ready to highlight projects you stepped into and problems you helped solve that your boss may not be aware of. Send these in an email after the conversation so your boss has a documented list of your wins.

If you haven't been documenting your wins regularly — the big ones and the small ones — now's the time to start. Jog your memory by reviewing emails, notes, Slack messages, and your calendar. We often lose track of all the things we've accomplished, especially as we get further along in the year. Without knowing your successes, you can't tell the story of the impact you're making.

Ask others to share your wins.

Sharing the wins yourself is just one part of defending your performance. Ask peers and other leaders to share your successes with your boss and advocate for you. Be specific about your ask, to ensure they share details of how you found the company cost savings on a recent project or stepped up and took over an account while your colleague was on leave. If your boss isn't aware that other leaders have pulled you into various initiatives, they might not realize how you're spending your time. As Michael Saterman, managing partner and chief customer officer of Saterman Connect, put it to me, "This is the time for allies in the workplace to step into action."

Ensure you have an updated job description.

Many employees have been expected to take on work outside of their original job descriptions during the pandemic. These additional responsibilities can include taking over for team members who have resigned, responding to repeated disruptions to the business, and pivoting to entirely new business models. If

your boss isn't aware of all of the extra tasks you've taken on, this could be another reason you're being mislabeled as a poor performer.

In my case, the CEO had asked me to lead a U.S. brand campaign on top of my responsibilities as the head of diversity, equity, and inclusion. And yet while my role fundamentally changed, my job description stayed the same.

If your performance is in question, make sure your job description is updated to account for the additional responsibilities you've taken on. This is critical for alignment with your boss on goals and expectations that may have changed. If your boss isn't willing to update it, update it yourself and send a copy to them as well as your HR business partner so that all parties have visibility into what you've been working on and how that's changed over the course of the pandemic.

Understand your options.

If you've been labeled a poor performer, it's also time to understand and consider all of your options. You may have success changing your boss' perception of your performance. If you don't, you'll likely be placed on a performance improvement plan (PIP), where your boss will outline the root causes of your poor performance and include clear expectations for improvement. It typically lasts between 30 and 90 days and includes weekly progress check-ins, in addition to HR involvement. If you complete the PIP successfully, you'll stay on in the role or may have an opportunity to move to another team. If you don't complete it successfully, you'll be asked to leave the company.

“The question to ask yourself is this: Do you want to continue to work for a boss who doesn't believe you are meeting the expectations of your job and consistently doubts your abilities? Being put on a performance improvement plan can be an uphill battle to fight, particularly when there are power dynamics

involved with a boss who doesn't believe you are doing your job," Chuck Adams, Managing Principal at LCW, told me. "The energy you are using to convince your boss that you are performing can leave you feeling exhausted and depleted, taking a toll on your mental and physical health. That energy could be spent finding another opportunity where you feel seen, valued, and heard, and are appreciated for your talents."

If you do make the decision to leave, Adams recommends sitting down with your boss and HR business partner and asking for a severance package before submitting a resignation. You may be able to negotiate more depending on the circumstances and your tenure. You can also ask for extended health care coverage or get access to outplacement services to help you find a career coach to assist you with finding your next opportunity.

Don't let being mislabeled as a poor performer define your self-worth. During this Great Resignation period, it might be time for you to start your next chapter. Great opportunities are out there waiting for you — don't let one boss define your career trajectory or what you're meant to do next.

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