

The Underperformance Playbook

How to Have the Hard Conversation

This playbook is the practical companion to Episode 11 of the Mastery podcast. Use it to diagnose underperformance properly, prepare and run the difficult conversation with structure, build a Performance Improvement Plan that actually works, and decide — with clarity — when to coach, when to PIP, and when to exit.

Designed for sales leaders, business owners, and managers responsible for sales teams — from one-person operations to multi-national functions.

TOOL 1

The Skill/Will Diagnostic

Before you have any underperformance conversation, place the rep on this matrix. Use evidence — activity data, deal data, observed behaviour — not opinion. The quadrant determines the conversation.

HIGH SKILL / HIGH WILL

The Top Performer

Capable and engaged. Delivering or exceeding the standard.

ACTION

Recognise, retain, stretch. Don't neglect them.

HIGH SKILL / LOW WILL

The Engagement Gap

Can do the job. Has done it before. Something has changed — motivation, confidence, life circumstances.

ACTION

Diagnose the change. Re-engage or address recoverability.

LOW SKILL / HIGH WILL

The Coaching Opportunity

Wants to do well. Doesn't know how yet. New to role, new to industry, or in a learning curve.

ACTION

Coach, train, shadow. Development — not underperformance.

LOW SKILL / LOW WILL

The Hard Conversation

Cannot do the job to the standard, and not motivated to change. Or not motivated to do it here.

ACTION

Structured PIP, with clear outcomes. Most likely exit.

DISCIPLINE CHECK

- Write down the rep's name.
- Write down which quadrant they're in.
- Write down three pieces of evidence — not opinion — that put them there.
- If you can't evidence the quadrant, your data is the problem. Fix that first.

TOOL 2

Pre-Conversation Checklist

Use this checklist before the conversation. If you can't tick everything, you're not ready.

DATA PREPARED

- Activity data for the last 8–12 weeks (calls, meetings, emails, demos).
- Deal data — number of opportunities, pipeline coverage, conversion rates, win rate.
- Quota attainment for the last 3–6 months.
- Specific examples with dates — missed forecasts, escalations, behavioural moments.

DIAGNOSIS COMPLETE

- Skill/Will quadrant identified, with evidence.
- The three specific behaviours that need to change are written down.
- The standard you're measuring against is documented and was previously communicated.

ENVIRONMENT READY

- Private room or 1:1 video call.
- 60 minutes blocked. No back-to-backs.
- Phone away. No interruptions.
- Rep informed in advance: "I'd like to discuss your performance." No ambushing.

HR AWARENESS

- If this could lead to formal action, HR has been informed.
- Local employment process and notice periods understood.
- Documentation plan in place for the meeting.

TOOL 3

The SBI-A Conversation Framework

Use this structure for the conversation itself. Four steps. In order. With listening built into every one.

S

Situation

Set the frame, clearly and without preamble.

EXAMPLE

“I want to talk about your performance over the last quarter.”

Don't bury the headline in small talk. Stating the situation clearly creates less anxiety, not more.

B

Behaviour

State observed behaviour, not personality.

EXAMPLE

“Your outbound activity has averaged 28 calls a week for the last six weeks. The team standard is 60. You've also missed three forecasted close dates without flagging them in advance.”

Specifics. Dates. Numbers. Not “you're lazy” or “you're not trying.”

I

Impact

Explain the impact on the team, the forecast, and the role.

EXAMPLE

“This is impacting team forecast accuracy. It's tying up manager time that should be coaching others. And it's putting your role at risk if it doesn't change.”

People deserve to understand why this matters. Be honest about the impact.

A

Action

Listen first. Then agree clear, measurable actions with timelines.

EXAMPLE

“Before we agree the way forward — talk to me. What's your view? Is there something I don't know?”

Listening is not the same as agreeing. Hold the standard. Agree the path. Confirm the next check-in.

TOOL 4

Language to Use vs Language to Avoid

The words matter. Replace each phrase on the left with the version on the right.

AVOID	USE INSTEAD
"I think..."	"The data shows..."
"People are saying..."	"I have observed..."
"You always / you never..."	"In the last six weeks..."
"You need to do better."	"By next Friday I need to see X, Y and Z."
"You're not pulling your weight."	"Your activity is below the team standard. Here's the gap."
"Is everything alright at home?" (as an opener)	"What's your read on what's driving the gap?"
"We're going to have to let you go if..."	"If this doesn't change, your role is at risk. Here's how we get there."
"I know it's hard, don't worry about the numbers."	"I hear you. The standard still needs to be met. Here's how we get there together."

TOOL 5

The 60-Day PIP Template

A PIP is a structured chance, not a sacking notice. Use this template to build one. Fill in every field.

REP NAME	<i>Full name and role title</i>
MANAGER	<i>Name of the manager owning this PIP</i>
DATE ISSUED	<i>DD / MM / YYYY</i>
PIP DURATION	<i>60 days (default). Adjust to 30 or 90 only with HR sign-off.</i>
CURRENT STATE	<i>Specifics: quota %, activity levels, win rate, behavioural concerns. With dates and numbers.</i>
REQUIRED STATE	<i>What “good” looks like. Numerical and behavioural. E.g. “50+ outbound calls/week, 8+ qualified opportunities/month, close 70% of forecast deals, weekly forecast accuracy within ±15%.”</i>
MANAGER SUPPORT	<i>What you will provide: weekly 1:1s, deal coaching, shadowing, training resources, manager-led calls.</i>
CHECK-IN CADENCE	<i>Weekly (recommended). Day, time, and format. Written progress note after each session.</i>
OUTCOME A: PASS	<i>Rep meets the bar. Removed from PIP. Continues in role with continued coaching.</i>
OUTCOME B: FAIL	<i>Rep doesn’t meet the bar. Conversation moves to exit. No third option — no extensions.</i>
REP SIGNATURE	<i>Signed and dated by the rep</i>
MANAGER SIGNATURE	<i>Signed and dated by the manager</i>
HR SIGNATURE	<i>Signed and dated by HR</i>

PIP DISCIPLINE

- Set up the weekly check-ins as recurring meetings before the PIP starts.
- Document every check-in in writing within 24 hours.
- Don’t soften the language at week 6 because you feel sorry for them — the PIP exists to protect both of you.
- If the bar is met, congratulate them publicly. If it isn’t, move to the exit conversation promptly.

TOOL 6

Documentation Checklist

Document every conversation. Not as a threat. As a record. Within 24 hours.

AFTER EVERY PERFORMANCE CONVERSATION

- Date, time, and location of the meeting.
- Attendees — manager, rep, HR (if present).
- Concerns raised, with specific data and examples.
- Rep's response and any context they shared.
- Agreed actions — what, by whom, by when.
- Support being provided by the manager.
- Date and format of the next check-in.
- Signed/acknowledged by rep — even just an email reply confirming receipt.

THROUGHOUT A PIP

- Weekly progress note: against each required state metric.
- Wins and concerns in the week.
- Coaching delivered — calls reviewed, time spent, observations.
- Trajectory — on track, slipping, or recovering?
- End-of-PIP summary — evidence of pass or fail against required state.

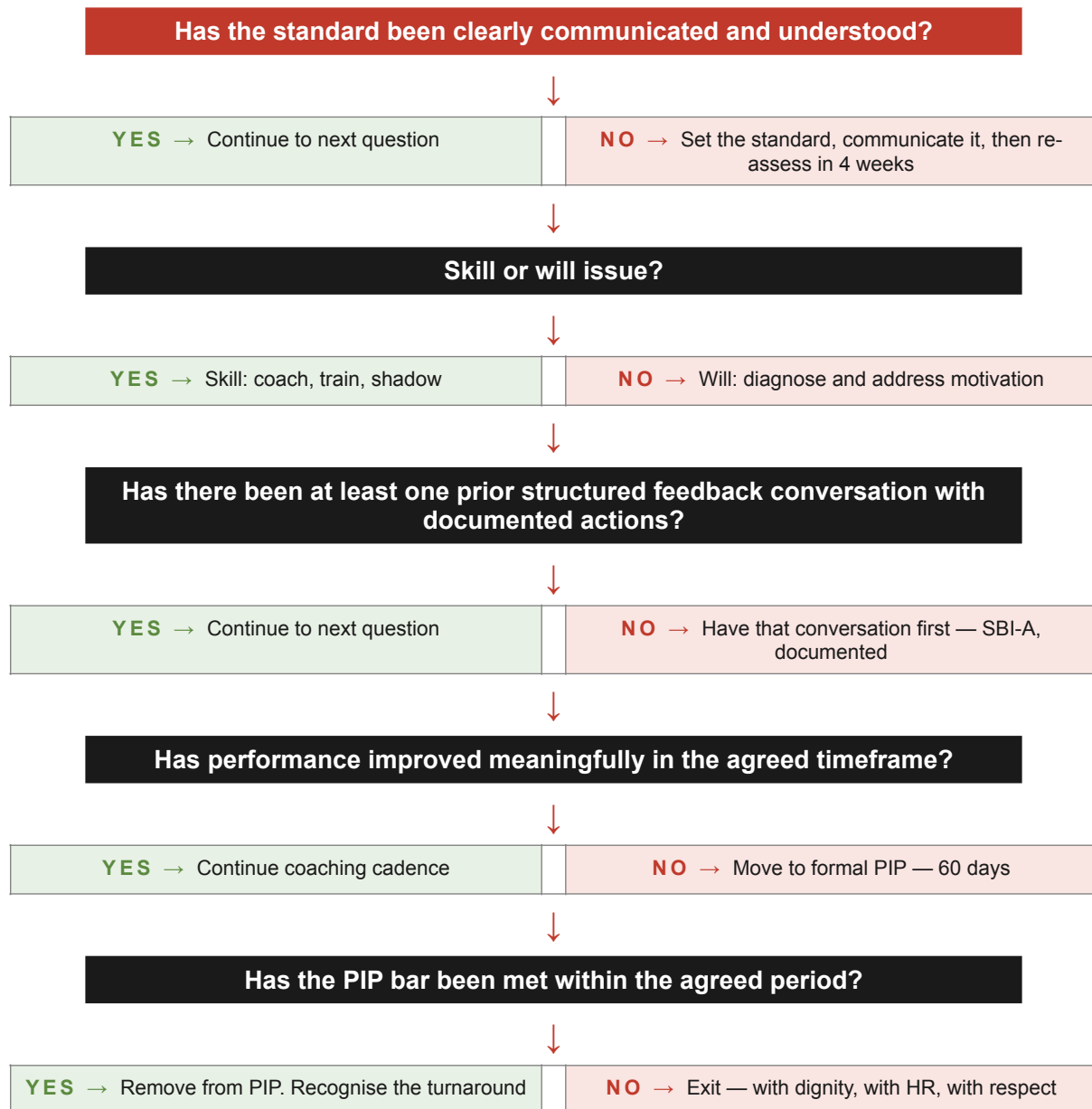
IF EXIT BECOMES THE OUTCOME

- HR involved in advance — not on the day.
- Process followed in line with local employment law.
- Notice, handover, references, and tone all clarified.
- Communication to the team agreed and respectful.

TOOL 7

Decision Tree

When you're unsure whether to coach, PIP, or exit — work through these questions. The answers point to the right next step.



THE PRINCIPLE BEHIND THE TREE

- Every step gives the rep a real chance.
- Every step protects the team and the standard.
- No step is skipped. No step is repeated indefinitely.
- The tree always reaches an answer — because indecision is itself a decision, and a costly one.

FINAL WORD

Don't carry underperformance.

Address it.

Avoiding the difficult conversation is not kindness. It is cowardice dressed up as kindness. The kindest thing you can do for an underperformer is tell them the truth and give them a real chance to change. The kindest thing you can do for the rest of your team is to make sure the standard is real. And the kindest thing you can do for yourself, as a leader, is to act decisively when action is needed.
