Expecting the Best

How To Manage Unreliable Developers

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My Experience Firing Staff

Employee #1 – No warning for the employee

Employee #2 – My boss did it for me

Employee #3 – Never happened, but should have

Employees #4 - #12 – Improved or left of their own accord

This Talk: Steps for Accountability

Step 1: Set Clear Expectations

Step 2: Monitor Your Team

Step 3: Address Failed Expectations

Step 4: Accept Necessary Endings

Review: What does this look like in practice?

Set Clear Expectations

"WHAT LOOKS LIKE RESISTANCE IS OFTEN LACK OF CLARITY."

SWITCH BY CHIP AND DAN HEATH

Employee #1
- I didn't have a clear idea of expectations
- Neither did he

Other Managers
- Employees not responding to DMs or email
- Clashes over importance of technical debt
- Disagreements on what a "day's work" is

How clear are your expectations?

What does good code look like?

What should devs be looking for in PR reviews?

How quickly should devs respond to email?

When should devs be available during the day?

What is the main priority for your team?

What is appropriate to say to a colleague who is "wrong"?

How To Identify Team Expectations

1. Think about what you REALLY expect
   ◦ Time and attendance, Code quality, Team interactions

2. Work with team to clarify the expectations

3. If they don't exist, draft standard operating procedures
   ◦ Phrase expectations positively
     ◦ Positive affirmations are more flexible than negative ones
     ◦ Ex: "walk in the hallway" instead of "don't run / crawl / hop / skip / slither / ride piggy-back, etc."
   ◦ Publish in a shared repository

4. Make the expectations part of the culture
   ◦ Documents are for reference
   ◦ Repeat, remind, reinforce, repeat again, and again, and again …

Sample Expectations

Preview | Code | Blame | Raw

Flagship Code Expectations

This set of expectations was developed by the Flagship team in the summer of 2023.

1. Write code that can be clearly understood without comments
2. Use standard design patterns to make the code predictable
3. Organize the code into small, highly-focused segments
4. Plan, document, and validate your logic with tests
5. Be particular about user input and user access
6. Centralize logic instead of duplicating it
7. Be explicit when defining relationships
8. Keep unused logic out of the code
9. Provide an exceptional user experience
10. Leave the code better than you found it

Provide Guidance for Individuals

Give clear guidance on work

- What takes priority
- Who will do which task
- When are the tasks due
- What is the scope of the task

Document expectations so developers can refer back to it when they forget.

For struggling devs, what exactly do you expect them to accomplish today / this week?

Step 1: Set Clear Expectations

Before you can hold someone accountable,
you both need to know what is expected.

Monitor Your Team

"PEOPLE NEED ATTENTION… AND THEY BECOME MORE ENGAGED AND MORE PRODUCTIVE WHEN WE GIVE IT TO THEM."

NINE LIES ABOUT WORK

BY MARCUS BUCKINGHAM AND ASHLEY GOODALL

Employee #2
- I didn't know how she spent a lot of her time
- I didn't realize she was causing problems elsewhere

Other Managers
- Not seeing the new framework a dev introduced
- Not realizing a developer was depressed about work
- Not noticing a developer wasn't working

When will you notice …

Doesn't understand an assignment

Is working on the wrong problem

Isn't writing secure code

Is overwhelmed by personal issues

Is less productive than other developers

Avoids certain responsibilities to the point where they are unable to do them in a pinch
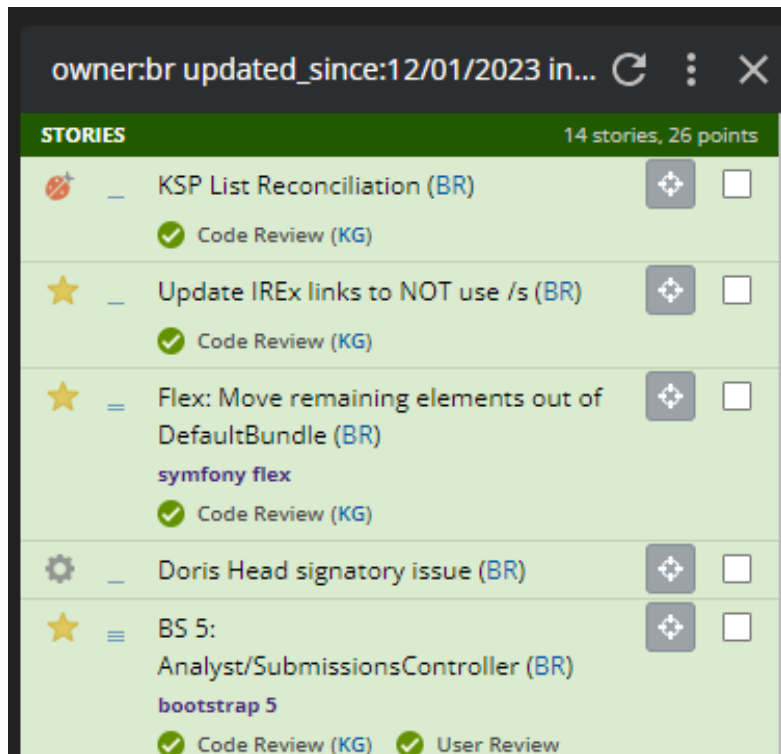
Has too many responsibilities

Is burned out

Is replacing all the variable names with emoji 😍

How long will your developers struggle before you realize they have a problem?

Watch how much work they do

DAILY / WEEKLY / SPRINTLY

OVER TIME

Metrics: January 1 – September 1

	PRs	# Tickets	Ticket Points
Dev 1	172	209	295
Dev 2	144	108	259
Dev 3	137	132	208
Dev 4	161	131	190
New Dev*	59	88	134
Manager	61	99	130
Dev 5	82	83	122

Developer began 4 months into the year.

Spot-check the quality of the code

Look for elements of your standards in PRs
- Every public method has related tests
- Methods are kept small
- Etc.

Look for quality code reviews from peers
- Are they flagging issues or just approving?

Talk regularly to your developers

Daily check-in for both code and person

Regular 1:1
- ◦ Review code
- ◦ Discuss professional development
- ◦ Assess burnout, stress levels, etc.

Step 2: Monitor Your Team

In order to hold someone accountable,
you need to know what they are doing.

Address Failed Expectations

"IF YOU SEE AN INFRACTION AND SAY NOTHING, THE OTHER PERSON CAN EASILY CONCLUDE THAT YOU'VE GIVEN PERMISSION."

CRUCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY BY KERRY PATTERSON, ET AL.

Employee #3
- I was scared to hold him accountable
- He created division in the team

Other Managers
- How to address a star developer who isn't reliable?
- What to say when you're not sure if a dev is lazy or incompetent?

What's your response?

A dev doesn't submit code for a week.

A dev breaks the production site. Again.

A dev is 10 min late to a senior staff meeting.

A dev acts ugly in a team meeting.

A dev dresses inappropriately in a video call.

You cannot predict the problems, but you can be prepared to respond.

Progressive Response Plan

Level 1: Reminder
- Have a talk about this action only

Level 2: Warning
- Have a talk about the evolving pattern (we've discussed this before …)
- Note consequences if problem continues

Level 3: Intervention
- Have a talk (which may include an HR rep) about the failure of the work relationship
- Start them on a **performance plan** and document all future issues (HR may need this documentation)

Level 4: Termination
- If you have formal HR, pursue discipline and termination process
- If you do not have formal HR, at end of performance plan period terminate the employee

How To Discuss Violations

1. Describe Event
◦ Objectively describe the behavior you observed
◦ Be specific about details, but stick to facts
◦ Avoid judgment. Neither accuse nor excuse.

2. Review Result
◦ Explain consequences of the action
◦ Why was the event not a good thing?

3. Invite Reflection
◦ Ask their intent when taking this action
◦ Ask what should they have done differently

4. Reset Expectations
◦ Remind of expectations going forward
◦ Note additional expectations because of this event

Example

(event) You were assigned ticket #1248, which fixed a bug in an edge case. You modified the code so that ONLY the edge case worked. You then pushed this "fix" to production.

(result) This change made the site unusable to most visitors while we scrambled to fix your bug. It also put a strain on other developers and our support desk.

(reflection) What was your intent in making the change like this?

(reminder) I expect you to test your fixes to assure they do not introduce new problems.

What's in a Performance Plan

Note failed expectations
- Brief description of the incidents which prompted this plan

Describe Specific Expectations
- Based on the issues discussed in our talks
- Should answer the question, "how will I know if I'm doing well on this plan?"

Set Duration of Plan
- When will we review your status

Include Weekly Performance Review Chart
- Start week by assigning exact work
- Review status of tickets / work at end of each week

Example for tracking low productivity

Ticket	Difficulty	Assigned	Due	Complete on time
1079	2	Nov 6	Nov 9	Yes
1083	1	Nov 6	Nov 7	Yes
1085	3	Nov 6	Nov 10	No
1086	2	Nov 6	Nov 10	No

Step 3: Address Failed Expectations

In order to hold people accountable,
you have to address issues when they arise.

Accept Necessary Endings

"UNTIL WE LET GO OF WHAT IS NOT GOOD, WE WILL NEVER FIND SOMETHING THAT IS GOOD."

NECESSARY ENDINGS BY HENRY CLOUD

Fears and reality about termination

FEARS
1 – "I don't want to hurt them by firing them"
2 – "They will hate me if I fire them"
3 – "I'm a failure as a boss if I can't fix this"
4 – "This person is too valuable to lose"
5 – "But I like this person"

REALITY

1 – It hurts to be failing at your job

2 – Meeting expectations is their choice

3 – You cannot control their choices

4 – Expectations should apply to everyone

5 – They will be better off in a better fitting job

Step 4: Accept Necessary Endings

If a person will not meet expectations,

it is best for everyone that they leave.

The Process In Action

Meet Minimum-Effort Mandy

Mandy is a developer on a remote team new to you.

She keeps erratic hours, has a habit of showing up late for meetings or missing them completely, and has very low productivity. It will take her days to do a task that another developer completes in a couple hours. It would not be surprising to learn that she has a second full-time job.

Her work is competent but not stellar, although in conversation it seems that she has a lot of technical knowledge.

Set Clear Expectations

Have a team conversation about time and attendance.

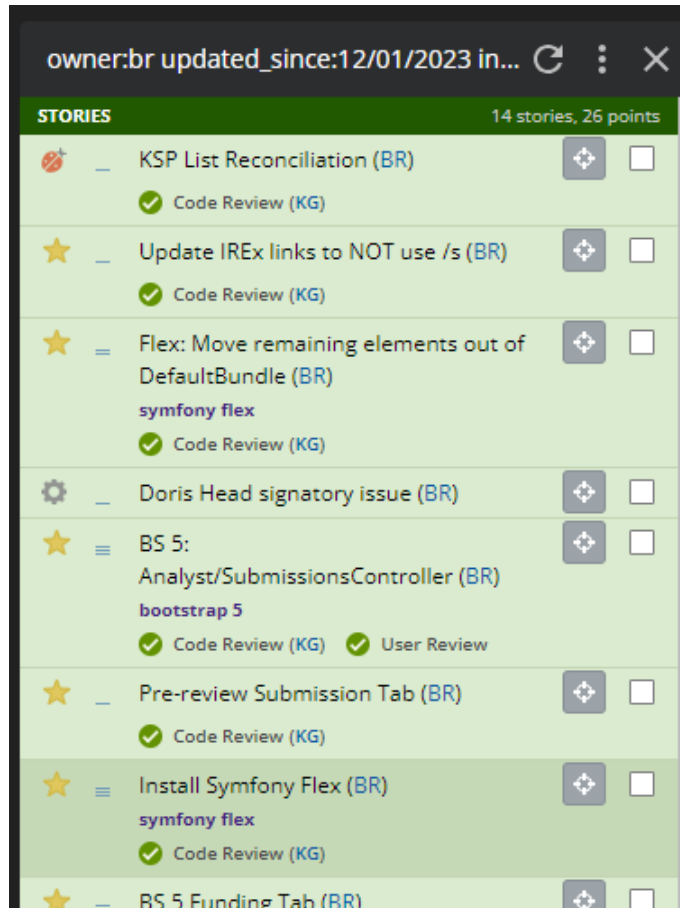Individually, clarify with Mandy:

- What time she is available each day
- Which meetings is she expected to attend
- How you will be gauging her productivity

Make sure Mandy's tickets are detailed and clear

Monitor Her Work

Check in with Mandy every morning

Meet with her for a 1:1 each week
- Review her PRs from the past week
- Assess productivity based on ticket completion

Spot-check her PRs and her code reviews

Run an aggregate report to see if she is an outlier

Level 1: Reminder Talk

Scenario:
◦ Mandy did very little work this week. Of the 6 tickets assigned for a sprint, she completed only 3.

What we say (focus on THIS situation only):
◦ **Event** In the last sprint you accepted 6 tickets. During the sprint, you did not indicate any concerns about completion and kept saying you would have it all done. By the end of the sprint, you had completed only 3 tickets.
◦ **Result:** By failing to complete your work, you caused the team to miss our target and set us behind on the next set of work.
◦ **Reflection:** What did you hope to achieve by keeping this struggle private until the end of the sprint?
   ◦ Mandy's Excuse: "My computer got messed up with the recent OS update."
◦ **Reminder:** I expect you to complete your work by the assigned date. If you are unable to do so, I expect you to let me know far in advance so our team can be prepared.

Level 2: Warning Talk

Scenario:
◦ Mandy was supposed to be part of a talk with senior staff, but she didn't show up for the meeting.

What we say (focus on the PATTERN):
◦ **Event** Last week you failed to complete your assigned tickets in a sprint (see Level 1 talk). Yesterday you were supposed to be in an important meeting but didn't show up, even though you were at work, and you didn't alert anyone that you wouldn't make the meeting.
◦ **Result:** Twice now we have relied on you and you let us down. Each time our team had to scramble to cover for your shortfall. I'm seeing a pattern of unreliability and lack of communication, and if it continues then we'll need to reevaluate how we work together.
◦ **Reflection:** What is preventing you from keeping your commitments?
   ◦ Mandy's Excuse: "My alarm clock didn't go off." [This is a pattern of behavior, so today's excuse is irrelevant.]
◦ **Reminder:** As a team we rely on each other. I expect you to honor your commitments as part of the team.

Level 3: Intervention

Scenario:

◦ In the previous week, Mandy took on only one simple ticket. She completed it, but has no other work to show for the week.

What we say (focus on the RELATIONSHIP):

◦ **Event** A month ago you didn't finish your tickets. A couple weeks ago you missed a leadership meeting. This week you spent five days on a task which, for someone of your experience, should have been done in a couple hours.

◦ **Result** While you did keep your commitments, you are still not carrying your share of the workload. As a result, other developers have to work harder to cover for your share of the responsibility. I feel that I cannot trust you to work as independently as you have been. Today I am starting you on a performance plan so we can work more closely going forward.

◦ *Save the **Reflection** and **Reminder** for after you've walked through the performance plan*

Level 3: Performance Plan

THE PLAN

Expectations:
- Complete assigned work by the given deadline
- Be on time and prepared for all meetings

Duration
- One month, with possible extension.

Weekly Check-in Chart
- Status of each ticket assigned
- Notes on any other issues during the week

THE DELIVERY

Each week I will assign your tickets and review your previous week's work. Let's talk about the tickets for this week …

Reflection: Do you think the expectations for this week are reasonable?

Reminder: We will be meeting regularly to discuss specific expectations. I expect you to honor your commitments to the team and to make whatever changes you need in order to be successful.

Mandy's Performance Plan

Week	Tickets Assigned	Tickets Complete	Attendance	Meeting Expectations?
1	102, 103, 105, 106, 109	102, 105	On time for all meetings	No. Low productivity.
2	111, 112, 114, 116, 118	111, 112, 114, 116	5 min late.	No. Late, incomplete work
3	120, 121, 122, 124, 125	120, 121, 122, 124, 125	On time for all	**Yes**.
4	126, 128, 129, 130	126, 128, 129, 130	Late for meeting	No. Late for meeting.
5	131, 133, 135, 137, 139	135, 139	On time for all.	No. Incomplete work
6	142, 144, 146, 148	142, 144, 146, 148	Missed meeting	No. Missed meeting
7	151, 152, 153, 155, 157	151, 152, 153, 155	On time for all.	**Yes**. Ticket expectations modified due to illness.
8	160, 161, 163, 164, 165	161, 163, 165	On time for all.	No. Incomplete work.
9	170, 173, 176, 178, 179	173, 175, 178, 179	Late for meeting.	No. Late, incomplete work.

Level 4: Termination

Scenario:

◦ Mandy has been on the performance plan for two months now. There were a couple good weeks, but it's clear that she is not meeting expectations.

What we say:

◦ **Event** Today is our scheduled day to review your performance plan results. Although you have had two good weeks, as I have noted in our regular reviews, you are not meeting expectations.

◦ **Result:** Because you have not been able to demonstrate the needed changes, this will be your final day with our team.

What's Your Plan?

MUCH OF WHAT WE CALL 'ADVICE' IS PERHAPS BETTER UNDERSTOOD AS "THE RECITATION OF A SET OF TACTICS THAT WORK FOR ME AND ONLY ME"

NINE LIES ABOUT WORK BY MARCUS BUCKINGHAM AND ASHLEY GOODALL

References

Crucial Accountability by Kerry Patterson, et al.
◦ Research-based recommendations on how to hold people accountable.

Crucial Conversations by Kerry Patterson, et al.
◦ Insightful and practical suggestions for having difficult conversations.

Necessary Endings by Henry Cloud
◦ A clinical psychologist and leadership coach discusses why and how to end things.

Boundaries for Leaders by Henry Cloud
◦ A clinical psychologist and leadership coach on how to use boundaries to lead teams.

Nine Lies About Work by Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall
◦ A number of great insights on leadership.

Switch By Chip and Dan Heath
◦ Insights on "how to change things when change is hard".

Notes available online at www.BryceEmbry.com