

# THE TRAJECTORY:

## A FRAMEWORK TO MANAGE UNDERPERFORMANCE

Many clients of mine share the following pain point: their team leaders do not manage underperforming workers effectively.

The typical scenario unfolds like this. A team member isn't meeting expectations. Their supervisor has a vague conversation about improvement but without specific goals or timelines. The employee knows there's an issue but lacks clear direction. Three months later, little has changed, and the supervisor faces a dilemma—either terminate someone without the confidence they were given enough chances at improvement or keep an underperformer who impacts the entire team.

This situation creates three significant problems. The employee lacks a clear path for improvement. The company retains an underperforming worker for too long. And the supervisor faces an ongoing emotional burden and a no-win situation.

A better alternative is to use a framework that I call “The Trajectory.”

### A better approach: the Trajectory Framework

The core objective of any Performance Improvement Plan should be to reach a **fast and fair conclusion**. This means giving the employee a clear, actionable plan and quickly determining one of two outcomes: either they improve to meet expectations, or they would be better served in a different role.

The keywords are “fast” and “everyone agrees.” Prolonged uncertainty benefits no one—not the company, the team, the manager, or the employees themselves, who might find greater success elsewhere.

The Trajectory Framework achieves this through a simple approach that creates clarity and alignment.



## Step 1: Visualize the Improvement Path

During a one-on-one meeting, draw a simple two-axis chart on paper. The horizontal axis represents time, and the vertical axis represents performance. Mark two points:

1. The origin: the employee's current performance level
2. A point in the upper-right: where they need to be in three months

Connect these points with a line—this is the improvement trajectory they need to follow.

## Step 2: Set Two-Week Milestones

On your chart, find the point that represents "two weeks from now." Move upward from there until you intersect the trajectory line and mark that point. This represents where the employee should be in two weeks to stay "on track."

Define specifically and objectively what behaviors, skills, and outcomes they need to demonstrate by this checkpoint.

## Step 3: Regular Check-ins and Adjustments

After two weeks, meet again to assess progress against the defined milestones:

- If on track as per the trajectory: acknowledge progress, celebrate small wins, and set the next two-week milestone.
- If not on track: collaboratively identify barriers and develop specific actions to get back on trajectory within the next two weeks.

Continue this cycle of bi-weekly check-ins. By the second or third meeting, it becomes clear to everyone whether the three-month objective is achievable – or whether the worker simply isn't a good fit for the role.

## Notes and recommendations

Some countries have specific regulations regarding Performance Improvement Plans, so consult with your HR department before implementation. You may need to adapt the timeframes or documentation to meet legal requirements.

That said, try to maintain the core principles: a continuous trajectory instead of a step function, short-term milestones instead of long-term ones, and regular check-ins.



## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Q: How do I define milestones?**

**A:** Ask yourself, what do I need to be able to observe in a couple of weeks to know that the worker is on track to become the kind of employee I want on my team?

From a people-improvement point of view, milestones do not have to be quantitative. Qualitative ones are also okay as long as they are specific and concrete (for example, “improve at sales” is too generic, but “learn how to ask good questions” is okay). *But check with your HR partner if there are specific requirements.*

### **Q: How do I avoid employee resistance or defensiveness?**

**A:** Position the framework as a collaborative tool for success rather than a punitive measure. Avoid mentioning the need for improvement as coming from you (that sounds arbitrary), but instead explain that it’s required by the job and necessary for the team/organization/mission. Emphasize that clarity benefits them by providing a fair opportunity.

### **Q: Where do I find the time for fortnightly check-ins?**

**A:** These meetings need not be lengthy: 15 minutes is often sufficient. That said, remember that if you don’t do these meetings, you save 15 minutes but will have to spend much more than that compensating for your worker’s underperformance in other ways.

## **Conclusion: From Steps to a Trajectory**

By shifting from a vague improvement process to a clear trajectory with visible milestones, you transform an uncomfortable situation into a structured path forward. This approach helps you have more productive conversations, create actionable improvement plans, and reach fair conclusions quickly.

