



## 9 Signs Your Team Member Is Struggling And What You Can Do About It

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All team leaders have been there. Project design is completed, funds are in place, you've hired a team, including some great local talent. Now you're getting stuck into implementation.

But things aren't going as smoothly as you hoped. Progress is slower than it needs to be to meet the milestones and you're concerned about keeping all parts of the project moving forward together.

You're pulled in all different directions and it's hard to find the time to sit down properly with your team to give them the help they need.

You're getting the feeling your staff might need more support than you originally thought. But when you ask them, they assure you they're fine.

There are many ways people may show they're struggling, and those signals are highly culture specific.

Here are a handful you may recognise.

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1. They're often off sick or needing to look after a family member, dealing with a crisis, taking a child to an appointment, or similar.
2. Their screen time is soaring, but nothing ever gets produced (or it's always "almost done").
3. They delay scheduling important workshops or meetings where detailed progress updates need to be shared.
4. They continually assure you that they're "working on it" but they're vague when pressed for details.

5. They start talking about training courses, or Master's degrees that they're interested in taking.
  6. You suspect (or know) they're looking for another job.
  7. They're absent from the office for long periods and you're not quite sure where they are. When asked, they usually reply that they were out meeting with a stakeholder, but that the person was late to the meeting / the traffic was bad / they couldn't find parking / the meeting went over time, etc.
  8. They're always talking about how busy they are.
  9. They deflect responsibility for tasks to colleagues or argue that a task they've been assigned is really someone else's job.
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All these things may on their own mean nothing at all and your team member may be doing just fine. But if you notice a pattern with a couple of these signs clustered together, you may have a problem.

If this sounds like one of your team members, what can you do about it?

You want to do everything you can to support your team, especially local staff, but you don't have the time to dedicate to properly build capacity.

You might also be "too close" – meaning, your local staff may not be comfortable asking for help for fear of losing face or appearing less knowledgeable than they think they should be in the position they've been hired for.

But in conservation and development projects, the stakes are too high to do nothing. As practitioners and team leaders in this field, we have a moral responsibility to ensure funds are being used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Let me explain further. In any field, it's vital to have a productive and efficient team. But in conservation and development, there's also a moral imperative to make sure you're doing the best job possible for the beneficiaries of the project (whether that is a local community, a landscape or a wildlife species). Your project might be the one chance those beneficiaries have to turn things around and create a better future.

For that reason, it's even more important to pay attention to what might be going on with your team and to think about how you can best support them.

Here are your options.

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### **Hire another staff member to bridge the gap.**

This may involve keeping the struggling team member or letting them go. On the one hand, more skilled hands on deck is always a good thing and more skills coverage in different areas can only make your team stronger. But it costs time and money to recruit and onboard staff and new hires also require ongoing support and management. Plus, there's no guarantee that a new staff member is going to be any more capable.

### **Engage a consultant.**

This can be a good stop-gap solution, as engaging a consultant can provide access to targeted expertise and a unique skill set that may otherwise be hard to find in an individual. But it can be just as time consuming to go to tender with just as much administrative work as it is to hire new staff.

Consultants don't always live up to expectations, they have low investment in a project's long-term success, and they are typically more focused on plans, strategies, reports and advice, rather than implementation. You may think they don't need as much support, but they still need to be briefed, they still need access to information and resources, and they still need management oversight.

### **Pick up the slack yourself.**

The other option, favoured by many in this field, is to just do the work yourself. You know the job will get done properly and it feels like the cheapest and quickest pathway. However, this is not sustainable and you risk getting overwhelmed and burnt out. There is a tipping point at which your own work becomes less effective and efficient if you have too much on your plate.

It goes against the ethic of strengthening the capacity of local staff. Doing the work yourself may lead to resentment from others in the team and it can shame and humiliate the staff member who is struggling.

## **Turn a blind eye and continue with business as usual.**

Another popular approach is to ignore the problem and just continue limping along as you are. It's common not to want to rock the boat; many people don't like confrontation and they're afraid they'll offend or do something culturally inappropriate. But this doesn't really help your staff member grow or learn. It doesn't help you, it doesn't help the project, and you risk wasting time and money. Plus, as touched on earlier, there's the moral dimension to accepting mediocrity or underperformance with funds that have been invested for positive impact.

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So far, none of these options are particularly attractive. While it's not common in conservation and development, there is another solution to help strengthen the capability of your local staff and it's probably a lot cheaper than you think.

## **One-On-One Coaching**

Some local staff may be highly skilled and motivated, and obviously may bring incredible value based on their knowledge of the local context. But they may not have had broad exposure to many different workplaces and therefore different ways of doing things and solving problems.

Engaging an expert to coach, mentor, and provide access to tools and resources can be an affordable way of supporting your local staff while taking the daily pressure off you as Team Leader to fulfil that role.

A good coach will work one-on-one with a staff member to identify where he or she might be stuck and will come up with a customised plan to create sustainable change and improvement.

Success builds success. While good coaching can help directly improve productivity to solve an immediate short-term capacity issue, it can be most valuable by instilling self-confidence, which has a longer-term return.

When a team member has a win, he or she is more confident to stretch a bit further and try different things. This means you as their manager, are more likely to give him or her more responsibility, which leads to higher levels of motivation and performance, and so on in a virtuous circle.

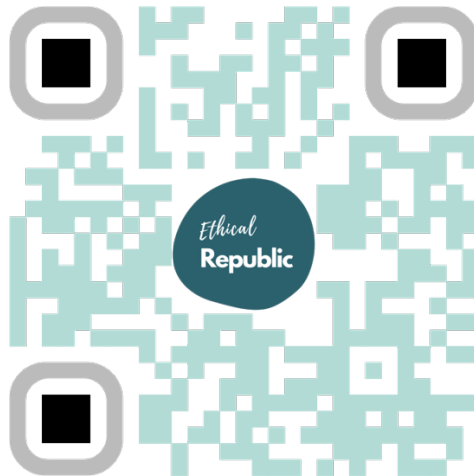
The benefits can be enormous – increased productivity, better communication, a staff member who is empowered, engaged and resourceful, and a far more positive team environment.

**If you think coaching could help support one of your team members in your conservation or development project, [Contact Us](#) to learn more.**

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