

# How Can I Help a Procrastinator?

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What do you do when a good employee seems to procrastinate on some actions requiring his or her attention? Of course you can provide feedback, but let me offer a suggestion for how you can serve that individual by enhancing his or her awareness.

Have the individual list all known “to do” items. Ask him or her to rate each item on a scale of 1-10 regarding perceived ability to execute the task. Lacking needed skills, rate the task a 1, 2, or 3. If he or she has mastered all the necessary behaviors, the evaluation would be an 8, 9, or 10.

Also ask the individual to rate each task according to how challenging the activity seems. Tasks that could easily be performed by just about anyone would be rated a 1, 2, or 3. Activities that are extremely difficult are worthy of an 8, 9, or 10.

My purpose in suggesting this analysis is to use some concepts contained in a 1984 book by Drs. Robert and Marilyn Kriegel entitled *The C Zone: Peak Performance under Pressure*. They selected the title based on a relatively new concept at the time, individuals with a “Type A” personality.

These people have a sense of urgency about everything they do. They enjoy tackling big challenges, whether they are skilled or not. Time pressures, however, can leave them feeling frustrated, nervous, and hostile. Research shows these individuals are susceptible to heart disease and burnout.

Contrasted with “Type A’s” were individuals who are low-key, less competitive, and less driven. These individuals were given the label “Type B.” They lack spark, vigor, and the dynamism necessary to consistently work at peak performance levels. (Leaders don’t like to be considered in this category!)

The Kriegels suggested a model where performance is at peak levels without the debilitating effects of stress. The “C Zone” occurs when the challenge of a task is approximately equal to the commitment and confidence of the individual, and he feels in control of his abilities and the situation. (In 1990, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi described this phenomenon more extensively in his book *Flow*.)

People usually love to tackle those items where they view the challenge of the task to be about equal to their ability. However, if the challenge is much higher than the individual’s perceived ability, the person may avoid that activity due to a subconscious fear of failure. This is easy to do if there are many other activities vying for the person’s attention.

On the other end of the spectrum, if the individual perceives the activity as relatively unchallenging and well within his or her capability, energy to tackle the task may be low. Again, this subconscious apathy can easily cause the individual to focus on any of the more challenging “to do” items.

An individual under your authority might repetitively avoid addressing necessary activities because of either unconscious fear or apathy. He or she may not realize that these unaddressed tasks may be very disconcerting to you or to an internal or external customer!

During a one-to-one conversation with this individual, draw a simple graph showing ability on the horizontal axis and challenge on the vertical axis. Draw a bisecting line at a 45 degree angle where ability equals challenge. Close to this line is the “C zone” or where “flow” occurs.

Point out that the portion of the graph above and to the left of the bisecting line (where challenge exceeds ability) can be a source of fear for some individuals and thus is sometimes unintentionally minimized in priority.

Also point out that the portion of the graph below and to the right of the bisecting line (where ability exceeds challenge) can be a source of apathy for some individuals, also resulting in an unintentionally reduced priority.

Once the individual understands these concepts, you are free to provide feedback whenever you observe the individual procrastinating on activities that you believe are worthy of his or her attention. Explain that you want the individual to address certain specific activities that you believe have not been high enough in that person’s priority assessment. Leave it to the individual to judge whether fear or apathy is a factor in the procrastination.

If you follow this guidance, you’ll reach a new level of openness with the individual. Further, he or she will forever be aware of and work to prevent unintentional procrastination.