



THE PLAYBOOK

The Standard

Defining what good looks like, so people stop guessing. Why most underperformance is an undefined standard, and how to build one from work you already have.

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Nobody told them what good was

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Show one, then write three lines

The tool: the definition of done card

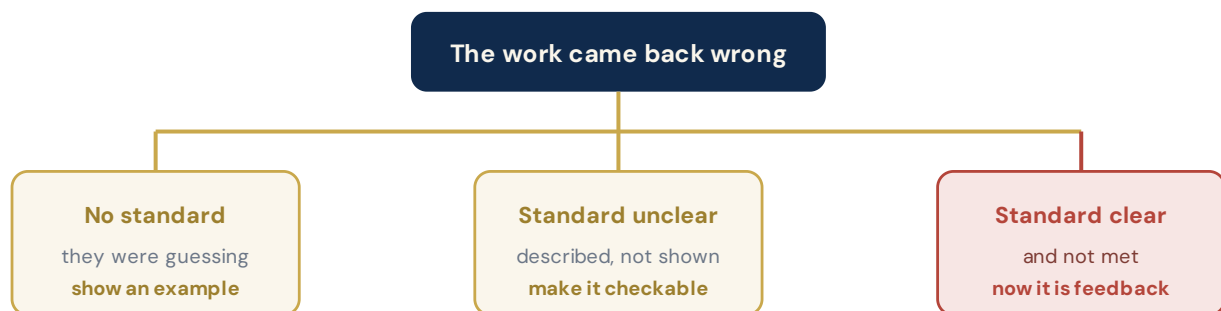
OPENING

Nobody told them what good was

A recurring theme across every playbook on this site is a question worth asking before any difficult conversation: could a capable, willing person have done this correctly with what they had?

Surprisingly often the answer is no, and the reason is the same. Nobody ever defined what good looked like.

WHAT LOOKS LIKE UNDERPERFORMANCE



Only the right-hand branch is a performance conversation. The other two are management problems wearing perform

Figure: check which branch you are on before having the conversation. Most managers start on the right and are usually wrong.

Three branches, and only one is a performance conversation. Most managers start on the right, because that is the branch that requires nothing of them.

This playbook is about the other two. It is short, because the fix is short: show an example, list three or four checkable things, and put it where the work happens.

Most underperformance is an undefined standard

The pattern is consistent enough to be worth stating plainly.

People do not usually produce poor work deliberately. They produce work matching their understanding of what was wanted, and where that understanding came from is rarely anything explicit.

It came from seeing one previous example, possibly not a good one. From a brief that described the task without describing the output. From what they would have wanted themselves, which is a reasonable heuristic and frequently wrong in someone else's business.

The tell: ask three people who do the same work to describe what a finished version looks like. If the three descriptions differ substantially, there is no standard, whatever anybody believes.

A standard everyone would describe differently is not a standard. It is a shared belief that there is one.

This is worth checking before concluding anything about performance, because the two situations look identical from the outside and need entirely different responses.

Show, do not describe

The most common attempt at fixing this is to describe the quality wanted. It does not work, and the reason is worth understanding.

"Thorough", "client-ready", "professional", "well structured" are all evaluations rather than descriptions. They tell somebody how you will feel about the output, not what to put in it. Two people can agree completely on the word and produce different documents.

THE SAME DELIVERABLE, ANNOTATED

The figure shows two document templates side-by-side. The left template has a red header 'NOT YET' and three red circles numbered 1, 2, and 3 on its right side. The right template has a green header 'THE STANDARD' and two green bars on its left side. Both templates have horizontal lines for text.

1 no source on the figure

2 no owner named

3 no date on the action

Figure: two real examples side by side with three numbered differences beats any written description of quality.

Show two real examples instead, and annotate the differences. One that met the standard and one that did not, with three numbered differences marked on them.

This takes about twenty minutes and it transfers more than an hour of explanation, because the differences are visible rather than described. It also removes the awkwardness: you are pointing at a document rather than at a person.

Use real work, with names removed. Invented examples are too clean and people can tell.

What a definition of done contains

Three or four items, each checkable by somebody who did not produce the work. Not more, because a long list is read once and then ignored.

01 Things that are objectively present or absent

Every figure has a source. The client name matches the contract. An owner and a date on every action. These are checkable in seconds and they are where most rework originates.

02 The thing this must do for its reader

One line about purpose. "A client should be able to read this and know what happens next without asking." That single sentence resolves more ambiguity than a page of formatting rules.

03 What it must not contain

Frequently more useful than what it must. No unsourced numbers, no internal shorthand, no commitments not in the scope. Exclusions are easier to check than inclusions.

04 Who checks it, and when

A standard with no checkpoint is a preference. Name the moment and the person, even if the person is the author checking their own work against the card.

The test for each item: **could a colleague verify this in under ten seconds without asking anybody?** If not, it is a quality description rather than a standard.

Building it from work you already have

You do not write a standard. You extract one, and the material is already in your business.

Take the last ten instances of the deliverable. Real ones. Sort them into fine and not fine, quickly and by instinct.

Then articulate the difference. Look at the two piles and ask what is actually different. This is harder than it sounds and it is the whole exercise, because most people have an instinct for the standard and have never made it explicit.

Write down the three or four differences that recur. Those are your standard. It is usually shorter and more specific than anybody expected, and often slightly embarrassing in its simplicity.

Then check it against the pile. Does the card correctly sort the ten? If a document you considered fine fails the card, the card is wrong rather than the document.

DO THIS WITH THE PEOPLE WHO PRODUCE THE WORK

Not to them. Sorting the ten together produces the standard and the buy-in in the same hour, and the discussion about the disputed ones is where the real definition emerges.

Where the standard lives

A standard in a document nobody opens is a standard that does not exist.

Attach it to the work, not to a folder. As a checklist on the ticket, a header comment in the template, a card next to the desk. It has to be present at the moment the work is being done rather than findable in principle.

Keep the annotated examples with it. The card says what; the examples show what that looks like. Both, together, in the same place.

And make it the first thing a new person sees for that task. This is the cheapest onboarding improvement available in most small businesses: instead of explaining what good looks like, hand them the card and the two examples.

Version and date it. Not bureaucracy. So that when it changes, everybody can tell which version their work was produced against, which matters the first time somebody produces something to the old standard and is told it is wrong.

Changing it without resetting everyone

Standards drift and should be revised. Revising them badly does real damage.

Announce the change, do not let people discover it. Discovering a raised standard through having work rejected is corrosive, and it is the most common way this is handled.

Say what changed and why, in one line. "We are adding sources on figures because a client checked one and we could not support it." A reason makes a new requirement reasonable rather than arbitrary.

Give a date from which it applies. Work in progress finishes to the old standard. Nothing is retroactively wrong.

And take items off when they stop mattering. A card that only grows becomes a ritual. If an item has not caught anything in a year, remove it and see whether anything changes.

Every addition to a standard should be paid for by a removal, unless the new one is genuinely load-bearing. Otherwise you are building a document that will be complied with rather than used.

When there should not be one

Standards are not free and they are not always right.

When the work is genuinely varied. If every instance is materially different, a definition of done becomes a constraint on judgement rather than support for it. Describe the purpose instead and leave the form open.

When it would encode a habit rather than a requirement. Some of what a standard captures is simply how the current expert prefers to work. Check each item against the question of whether the work would actually be worse without it.

When it is being used to avoid a conversation. Occasionally a standard is written because somebody does not want to give feedback to a specific person. That is what it will be understood as, by everybody.

And when the real problem is capacity or authority. A person who cannot meet a standard because they have no time or no permission does not need a clearer definition of done. This is the same diagnostic as everywhere else on this site, and it is worth running before writing anything.

Show one, then write three lines

Before any conversation about performance, check which branch you are on. If nobody defined what good looked like, the person was guessing, and they guessed in good faith.

The fix takes an hour. Sort ten real examples into fine and not fine. Articulate what actually differs. Write down the three or four recurring differences, each checkable in ten seconds by somebody who did not do the work. Annotate two real examples, one of each. Put all of it where the work happens rather than in a folder.

Then when a standard is genuinely clear and genuinely not met, you have an ordinary feedback conversation with something specific to point at, and both people know it is fair.

The card overleaf is deliberately small. If yours needs a second page, it has stopped being a standard and started being a manual.

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Definition of done card

Three or four items, checkable in ten seconds · v1

Deliverable

**Must be true, and a colleague can verify it in ten seconds**

1
2
3
4

**What it must do for
its reader**

**What it must not
contain**

**Checked by, and
when**

Version and date

Build it by sorting, not by writing. Take ten real examples, split them into fine and not fine, then articulate what actually differs. Keep one annotated example of each attached to this card.

Every addition should be paid for by a removal. A card that only grows becomes a ritual people comply with rather than use.