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Dual Track Performance Leadership

A Practical Model for Leading Performance and Supporting Needs at the Same Time

Tina Sarkar-Thompson, CHRL, MEd, MBA

irc.queensu.ca

Introduction: A Leadership Methodology Developed Through Real Practice

Across years of coaching leaders through complex performance situations, I have noticed a recurring pattern: many leaders avoid addressing performance issues in the hope that things will simply improve on their own. When that same employee later raises medical needs or requests an accommodation, the hesitation intensifies. Leaders freeze. They soften the message, delay the conversation, or avoid it entirely. Sometimes to the point of considering termination under the guise of restructuring. Not because of lack of competence, but because they fear getting something wrong.

To help leaders navigate this challenge, I have developed a leadership methodology that I call "Dual Track Performance Leadership". It's a practical, leader-friendly approach that teaches leaders how to manage performance expectations and support employee needs at the same time. This concept is distinct from the "dual track" term used in career progression; here the two tracks refer to **Performance Clarity** and **Support Exploration**.

Dual Track Performance Leadership is not a disability framework. It is a leadership capability: the ability to hold compassion and accountability simultaneously.

Why Leaders Freeze

When performance issues intersect with medical needs or accommodation requests, leaders often experience a freeze response. Common concerns include:

- What if I say the wrong thing?
- Will this seem discriminatory?
- What if I make the situation worse?

The hesitation is understandable, but it has consequences:

- **Avoidance Harms the Employee:** Without clear expectations, employees cannot succeed. They may believe their performance has been acceptable until the gap becomes unmanageable.
- **Avoidance Harms the Team:** Colleagues absorb the workload, resent the inconsistency, and lose trust in leadership.
- **Avoidance Harms the Leader:** Credibility erodes and leaders become known as people who avoid difficult conversations.
- **Avoidance Harms the Organization:** Risk increases. Documentation weakens. Options narrow.

Avoidance is not compassion. Clarity is.

Why This Matters Now

Today's leaders are navigating:

- Increased medical accommodation requests
- Rising mental health needs
- Hybrid work complexities
- Heightened expectation for empathy and inclusion
- More complex employee situations than ever before

Leaders want to be human-centered, but many have never been taught how to hold compassion and accountability at the same time. Dual Track Performance Leadership gives them a practical way to do it.

The Myth: "If there is a medical issue, I can't manage performance."

This misconception is widespread and incorrect. Medical needs do not eliminate performance expectations. Accommodation is about removing barriers, not removing standards. Leaders can and must do both.

Research consistently shows that:

- Accommodation improves employee outcomes
- Early intervention improves return to work success
- Supportive leadership improves well-being
- Clear expectations reduce risk

Although research provides guidance on performance management and workplace accommodation, these areas are almost always treated as separate domains. In practice, leaders and HR professionals routinely have to navigate them concurrently. There is currently no published leadership model that integrates both into a single, practical framework for leaders. Dual Track Performance Leadership fills this gap by giving leaders a clear, actionable way to hold compassion and accountability simultaneously.

Dual Track Performance Leadership

This is a simple, practical framework that helps leaders act early, fairly, and confidently when performance issues and support needs intersect. It removes false choice between compassion and accountability.

The model has two parallel tracts: Performance Clarity and Support & Accommodation Exploration.

Track 1: Performance Clarity

This track focuses on the work itself: expectations, impact, and the required change.

Leaders must clearly articulate:

- Essential duties
- The performance gap
- The impact
- What needs to change
- Timelines
- How progress will be monitored

This track is about expectations, consistency, and accountability.

Track 2: Support & Accommodation Exploration

This track focuses on barriers and support, not diagnosis or medical details.

With the support of HR, their organizations, and disability management specialists/providers, leaders explore:

- Functional limitations
- Tasks impacted
- Reasonable adjustments
- What can be modified about how work is done
- What cannot be modified because it is essential

This track is about compassion, flexibility, and problem solving.

The Power of Running Both Tracks Together

Most leaders mistakenly believe they must choose:

- Do I address the performance?
- Or, do I focus on support needs?

Dual Track Performance Leadership teaches leaders how to do both at the same time.

When leaders run both tracks together:

- Employees feel supported, not singled out
- Expectations remain clear
- Accommodations are purposeful
- Performance conversations feel fair
- Risk decreases
- Documentation improves
- Trust increases

This is modern leadership.

Case Examples from Real HR Practice

Case 1: When Support Unlocks Performance

A leader notices declining performance and opens the conversation early. The employee shares they are experiencing medication-related fatigue. With modified deadlines and a quiet workspace, performance rebounds, the employee feels supported and accountable.

Case 2: When Performance Does Not Improve

A leader provides clear expectations and reasonable accommodations. Despite this, the performance gap remains. Since the leader acted early and documented consistently, the organization can move forward fairly and transparently.

Case 3: Early Intervention Prevents Escalation

A leader notices small inconsistencies and checks in early. The employee shares that they're struggling with temporary medical side effects. A short-term accommodation is put in place, and the issue resolves before it becomes a pattern.

These examples illustrate a core truth: Support does not replace performance expectations; it enables them.

What Leaders Get Wrong

Across years of HR practice, several patterns consistently emerge:

- Waiting too long to act
- Assuming medical issues are equivalent to "hands off"
- Over-accommodating without structure
- Failure to document
- Not looping in HR early
- Confusing empathy with avoidance

Avoidance is not kindness. Clarity is.

Leader Scripts: Practical Language for Difficult Moments

Leaders often freeze because they do not know what to say. The following examples could help:

Opening the Conversation

"I want to check in because I've noticed a few changes in your work, and I want to understand what's changed so I can support you and ensure expectations are clear."

Asking About Barriers, Not Diagnosis

"Are there any barriers affecting your ability to meet expectations that we should be aware of?"

Or

"Do you think you would benefit from any workplace accommodations?"

Setting Expectations

"These responsibilities remain essential to your role. Let's discuss what support you may need to meet them."

Following Up

“Here’s what we agreed to, here’s what support is in place, and here’s what we’ll review at our next check-in.”

Then follow up the conversation with a summary email so you and the employee have a record of what was discussed.

Why Dual Track Performance Leadership is a Leadership Model, not an HR Process

Dual Track Performance Leadership is fundamentally a leadership capability. It requires:

- Courage
- Emotional Intelligence
- Clarity
- Consistency
- The ability to hold two priorities at once
- The discipline to act early
- The skill to communicate with compassion

These are core leadership behaviours taught across modern leadership development programs, including those offered by Queen’s University IRC. This model does not replace HR processes, but instead, strengthens leadership behaviour within them.

Conclusion: Courageous Leadership is Both Compassionate and Clear

Leaders today must be able to hold compassion and accountability at the same time. Dual Track Performance Leadership gives them a practical way to achieve this. You can be supportive and still set boundaries. You can accommodate and still expect performance. You can care deeply and still lead firmly.

Performance and support needs are not opposites: they are two rails of the same track. When leaders run both rails in parallel, aligned, steady, and consistent, the organization moves forward safely and smoothly.

This is responsible, human-centred leadership.

About the Author

Tina Sarkar-Thompson, CHRL, MEd, MBA, is a human resources professional with over 25 years of experience that includes providing strategic HR guidance to senior leaders and employees in all facets of HR, including employee and labour relations, talent development, organizational planning, learning and development, total rewards, health and safety, operations as well as policy and program development.

She is currently the Assistant Vice President, Human Resources at ROM (Royal Ontario Museum) and a part time course developer, designer and lecturer for Toronto Metropolitan University's new HR Management & Leadership Program. Tina's HR background includes roles at Trinity College in the University of Toronto, the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), Toronto Metropolitan University and The Anglican Church of Canada. Tina has been sought out as a speaker and consultant in the areas of change management, team building and disability employment issues.

Tina holds a BSc in Psychology and an MEd in Leadership, Higher & Adult Education, specializing in Workplace Learning & Social Change from the University of Toronto. In 2022, she graduated with an Executive MBA with an HR concentration from the Jack Welch Management Institute at Strayer University. She is a Certified Human Resources Leader (CHRL) from the Human Resources Professional Association. Tina is passionate about people, employment and inclusion.

Outside of work, Tina is a second-degree black belt in Taekwondo, an assistant martial arts instructor, and is training for her third-degree black belt. She has held various leadership positions on volunteer boards that serve the community.

Industrial Relations Centre (IRC)
Queen's University
Kingston, ON
irc.queensu.ca