

Managing Performance Issues

The key to successfully managing performance is to take steps to tackle a problem as soon as it comes to your attention.

Whilst it is human nature to give people the benefit of the doubt, prevaricating too long can let a minor issue develop into a full blown problem. If you keep avoiding what may appear to be a tricky conversation now, it could mean that you have to have a much more difficult conversation in the future.

If a problem is left for a number of months and then the employee is hit with a list of problems, their reasonable reaction is going to be “why didn’t you tell me sooner” or “as no one had said anything I thought I was doing okay”.

If a problem arises with the performance of a new employee, the balance is between giving them time to settle in and learn a new job and questioning whether they are going to be able to perform to the required level.

If a problem arises with an employee who has been with you for some time, the balance is between treating a drop in performance as a temporary ‘blip’ and letting it go on too long out of a sense of loyalty to the individual.

Issues of performance can include;

-  Behavioural– attitude, attendance, application.
-  Ability – knowledge, work load, adjusting to change.

What helps in identifying and tackling performance issues early on is to have regular one on one conversations with every member of your team. Remember – don’t save problems with performance for a formal review, tackle them as soon as they arise.

New Employees

Have a brief review with a new employee at the end of their first week and first month and a more formal review of progress at the end of three months.

Possible questions to ask include;

-  How are things with you?
-  How are you finding the work?
-  How are you finding the workload?
-  How do you feel you are settling in?
-  How are you getting on with the other members of the team?

Current Employee

Have a regular one on one conversation (at least every two month's) with every member of your team. Don't just talk about the weather and what they did at the weekend (although a bit of polite conversation is not a bad thing), talk about their work and current objectives.

Possible questions to ask include;

-  How are things with you?
-  How are things going with (project details)?
-  What have you managed to achieve since the last time we met?
-  How are you getting on with (new starter)?
-  How do you think they are settling in?

New Employees

As the employer, you have a responsibility to ensure that you provide any tools or training to ensure that your employee is able to perform in their job.

If you are seeing a drop in performance or recurring problems then the questions to ask yourself include;

-  Have work practices changed?
-  Have you provided sufficient training?
-  If someone is not coping with their workload are they trying to do the work of two people?
-  Has a new person joining the team affecting the dynamic of the group - why?
-  Does the employee have any developing health or home issues?

Whilst it's not the employers' responsibility to solve health or home issues, the Company must be mindful of the legal aspects of offering flexible working, time off for dependents and disability discrimination.

Having that Difficult Conversation

If the problem does not appear to be a 'blip' then you should have a private, informal conversation with the employee at which you raise your concerns, discuss possible solutions and agree a future review date.

After the meeting, follow up with a letter that sets out; the concerns raised, details of what was agreed to tackle any issues, what improvement is required and the date of a follow up review meeting.

During the meeting, stick to facts not feelings and provide examples of where there is evidence of why you are concerned.

For example;

Attendance

I notice that you have taken off xx days sick in xx weeks – which is above average for the Company (check the figures - don't make them up!) and I am concerned that may be effecting you and your performance because (example of a problem or error).

Is there anything you want to tell us or we can help with? (Advise the employee that they don't have to tell you their personal issues but it would be useful to know if there is a problem at work or home as it may help you to understand why their attendance and/or performance is not at an acceptable level.)

If a medical issue is raised, ask if there is anything the Company needs to be aware of from a health and safety point of view – e.g. has any medication been prescribed?

As an employer, you may want to consider offering the employee with an appointment Occupational Health specialist.

Performance

There have been a number of errors made, for example XX – what are your thoughts on why these occurred?

After XX weeks and the training you have been given it would be reasonable to expect that X amount of tasks are completed in a day. Your level is below that of others in the team doing the same job (check the figures - don't make them up!). Are you experiencing any problems or difficulties we can help with?

Costs of Prevaricating

The costs to your business of not tackling an issue as soon as possible include the obvious damage caused by reduced or lost productivity.

Other hidden costs can include; damage to your reputation through poor customer service, the negative impact it has on other team members (If they can get away with it why cant I?), damage to team morale through a rising resentment of people who don't appear to be pulling their weight, management time taken up in resolving problems, covering absence or having to carry out disciplinary meetings.

How we can help – **Persona People Management Ltd** are experienced on advising on and helping to resolve difficult employee issues. Call us on **01488 639728** or email Michelle Prescott at **mprescott@personapm.co.uk**. and we can give you straightforward HR advice, suitable for the size of your business and your budget.