

# Putting the 'people' into performance management and appraisals

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One of the ways educators achieve job satisfaction and improve the quality of their work with children is through the feedback and guidance received from peers and leaders. Positive, constructive feedback and guidance gives professionals a clear idea of what they are doing well and where they can improve practice.

When feedback and guidance in the workplace is formalised and targeted, it is often referred to as 'performance management'. Effective performance management supports and lifts the standards of practice of educators which in turn improves the quality of care for children and their families. A regular review of the performance of teams and child care services also contributes to quality care.

## Why manage performance?

The process of performance management has the dual purpose of supporting individual professional development and encouraging accountability against roles and responsibilities. In performance management educators take part in a process that allows them to regularly reflect on their current practices, set goals and develop concrete strategies for achieving goals.

Performance management also encourages professionals to regularly review their progress against set goals and to develop and refine expectations for their career development.

Through performance appraisals and reviews, services can also link individual professional directions with organisational goals. An added benefit of a positive performance management process is improved job satisfaction, which contributes to cohesive teams and reduces staff turnover.

## Effectively managing performance

Along with recruitment, induction and team development processes, performance management should be an integral part of the way services manage staff. To be effective, performance management needs to be regularly administered in a way that has value for individuals by contributing positively to their professional development.

### This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 5.2 and 5.3

OSHCQA Principle: 8.5

QIAS Principles: 7.3 and 7.4

Performance management will also be effective when educators are encouraged to take a positive view and be active participants in the preparation, implementation and review of their own performance.

Effective performance management will also:

- Clarify individual and service goals
- Define the link between service improvement and individual roles
- Establish actions to achieve goals
- Provide a forum for discussion and negotiation between educators and leaders
- Help to deal with organisational change
- Address performance problems constructively and positively
- Help educators find meaning in their work and stay on track.

## A positive climate

To be effective, a positive climate for performance management needs to be established in which educators feel comfortable with the purpose and methods used. Performance management should be communicated as a way to support and improve individual practice for the overall good of the service, children and families.

Performance management can be damaging if it is an imposed system from above with only management's interests at heart or is used as a way of finding flaws or controlling staff. This can lead to distrust and resentment, limiting its effectiveness. An environment of mutual trust, and a commitment to performance management, can be developed when managers model a positive attitude and invite individuals to participate in decision making about the structure and content of the appraisal process.

## Strategies for managing performance

To manage performance it is useful to use an appraisal process that allows for goal setting, self-reflection and action planning. Performance appraisals are usually conducted in a confidential environment between an employee (educator or other staff member) and their manager. However, self and peer reviews can also be useful methods for monitoring and guiding individual performance. Start the appraisal process by developing a mutual understanding between the two parties about what needs to be achieved. Allow for some self-reflection or evaluation prior to the appraisal discussion.

Effective appraisals should:

- Allow reflection, review and discussion of past performance with input from both parties
- Recognise the contributions made by the employee through genuine praise and positive reinforcement
- Allow 360° feedback from peers, leaders and other relevant parties
- Address any performance problems clearly and constructively
- Establish goals for the future
- Develop action plans that identify concrete and realistic actions for change, clarify time frames and outline the resources needed such as further professional development
- Be put in writing and agreed upon by both parties
- Identify the date for the next performance follow-up or review.

### Communicating positively

Managers can create a constructive atmosphere and get the best results from



Educators, staff members and managers can contribute positively to a performance appraisal process by:

- Listening to the thoughts, feelings and ideas of others
- Positively and clearly expressing their own feelings and ideas, even when these conflict with those of the other party
- Expressing views in a polite and constructive manner
- Accepting that performance can be improved by a willingness to take the lead, as well as by following the lead of others.

performance appraisals by adopting positive communication techniques. Discussions during appraisal sessions should be held in a confidential environment where interruptions are minimised and managers sit next to or opposite the employee, not behind a desk which acts like a barrier. Be aware that the employee may feel uncomfortable talking about their performance or accepting praise or constructive criticism.

When discussions take place, start by asking questions and listening actively to encourage employees to do the talking. Adopt a positive tone to spark discussions using open-ended, reflective and directive questions about past performance and the employee's views. Seek their ideas and solutions to performance areas that need to be addressed. Try to suggest and add solutions in a constructive way and invite them to offer alternatives to solutions that you have suggested.

### Addressing poor performance

It is important to build on the positive performance of the employee and show an awareness of, and clearly address, negative performance issues. When negative performance needs to be addressed, managers should make sure positive communication strategies are used and a non-threatening atmosphere is created for discussions with the employee.

If the employee does not raise the issue that needs addressing throughout the appraisal, it should be raised by the manager with a focus on finding a solution rather than reprimanding or punishing past performance.

Positively discuss the specifics of the person's actions and invite their reflections by asking open ended questions such as, "You seem confident when you talk to families each day, how well do you feel you communicate with families when their child's behaviour is challenging?", "How do families respond to your approaches?" or "What positive ways could you discuss a child's biting with a parent?"

Allow enough time for discussion and focus on solutions through action planning and seeking the professional's input on goals and strategies for future improvement. Using a positive approach throughout the appraisal process, it is essential that the details of the employee's negative performance are clearly stated and that expectations are clarified through their roles, responsibilities, job description and service policies. A written agreement between the employee and manager on future directions for improvement is also essential as is regularly reviewing their performance against the agreed action plan.

### Individuals and their growth

Being an active participant in the performance management process will bring rewards for individuals as they engage in self-reflection and look positively towards the future. Building on strengths, being aware of weaknesses and committing to action for future improvement can help individuals to derive success and satisfaction in their professional life. By linking personal goals with service goals, individuals can also gain satisfaction in actively contributing to meeting the needs of children, families, peers and the overall service.

Individuals can guide their performance improvement by taking positive steps towards professional growth. Seeking feedback from peers and leaders, negotiating for the resources needed to improve, and self-mentoring through reading and observing the work of respected peers can help

professionals to be active participants in their professional improvement. Their performance will also be enhanced when they strive for balance in their emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual growth.

### Conclusion

Central to any performance management process is a commitment by educators, staff members and managers to improve individual practice for the benefit of children, families, peers and the overall service. Opportunities for employees to reflect on their performance and to contribute to an action plan for improvement are also essential. Being able to sit down in a confidential and trusting environment will allow open discussions, negotiations and agreement about individual performance goals that are linked to organisational needs ■

The following reflective questions may be useful for individuals as they prepare for and participate in the process of performance improvement:

- What personal and professional resources do I bring to my role?
- How confident do I feel in my role?
- How do I see my relationships with my colleagues?
- How flexible am I in trying new things and moving out of my comfort zone?
- What organisational goals do I contribute to as an individual?
- What improvements would I like to make to my work with children?
- What steps can I take to achieve personal and organisational goals?
- How will I know when I have achieved my goals or improved my performance?

(Adapted from: Jorde-Bloom, 2007, pp.80-81).

### References and further reading

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