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A Guide to Staff Development and Performance Discussions

THE PURPOSE OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE DISCUSSIONS

The [Name of House] wants a productive and satisfying work environment that contributes to the strategic priorities, objectives and values of the House. Central to achieving this, the [Name of House] wants to recognise and value staff, identify training and development needs and ensure that staff are clear about the duties, responsibilities and expectations of their position. The House also wants to ensure that anyone responsible for managing staff fulfills their roles and responsibilities to plan, support, monitor and review the development and performance of staff. The aim is for everyone at the House to be better informed and up-to-date on work progress and performance through improved relationships and understanding.

Staff development and performance discussions can play an important role in achieving this and in keeping staff encouraged and engaged. Done properly they are all about gaining a shared understanding of:

- What has to be done;
- How is it to be done (which includes information, resources or procedural instructions);
- How you know that it has been done successfully
- The strengths, challenges and interests of the staff member.
- Areas for performance improvement
- Any training and mentoring that is needed
- Recognition and appreciation for great performance.

The emphasis is on **shared** understanding which means there is one step that underpins all of these stages, that is, forming strong relationships with employees.

Your discussions will only be as deep and as productive as the relationship with your employee. If the relationship is shallow or strained the discussion will also be shallow and strained. So from day to day, and before any formal staff development and performance discussions, take the time to get to know your team. Hold regular team meetings and talk regularly with individual staff.

Remember, a year is a long time and small problems can become very big ones if not addressed in a timely fashion. Staff development and performance discussions shouldn't just happen in a formal meeting; it can also be conducted informally and on a daily basis.

If difficult issues come up, deal with them at the outset and don't wait for the next scheduled formal meeting. Otherwise, the result will be the problem spiralling out of control and becoming a much bigger issue. Minor performance issues can become intractable disciplinary matters that could have been resolved more easily with an appropriate conversation early on.



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Nevertheless, regular, formally arranged staff development and performance discussions will help staff and the House focus on long term improvements. Seeing progress is the best motivator for anyone.

When well prepared for and properly conducted, the staff development and performance discussion process indicates to staff a professional approach, appreciation of their contribution and the desire to see them improve and grow within the House. It also shows which employees are making the most valuable contribution and which, if any, are letting the side down.

In summary, the purpose of staff development and performance discussions is to:

- Give recognition to staff for their skills and knowledge and contribution to the House.
- Identify personal and professional goals.
- Encourage staff to develop their individual potential to the full.
- Include critical reflection by each staff member on their work experiences, their work performance and their role and contribution.
- Review each staff member's work performance and identify specific strengths and weaknesses.
- Frankly and confidentially discuss any problems and possible solutions.
- Consider any constraints to staff performing their work to the required standard.
- Motivate staff and ensure they are appropriately contributing to the goals of the House.
- Determine any training or other support needs.
- Review the Position Description and classification.
- Identify and record outcomes such as specific training requirements, preparation of work plans, revised work practices, updated position description and classification, areas for improvement and targets and timelines to be met.

WHAT TO DO

Some employees and managers dread staff development and performance discussions. They create paperwork and administration that has to be carried out on both sides. For the manager, such meetings may require providing constructive but challenging feedback to staff, which can be difficult. Staff also can feel uncomfortable and even threatened by them. However, well conducted meetings can be very motivating and help staff and the House move forward, so it is important to make every effort to hold discussions that are constructive, productive and seen in a positive light.



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Get the process documented and understood

Whatever process you use for staff development and performance discussions with your staff, you need to have it documented, shared and understood by your staff.

They need to know exactly what the process will be, what to expect, how to participate to the best of their ability, how performance will be discussed and assessed, what outcomes will come from the meeting and what sort of things will go on their personnel file.

The more open you are about the process, the better the discussion will be as staff will be less stressed about it.

Refer to position descriptions

Each employee should have a comprehensive position description that details the duties of their position and the standards they are expected to achieve. This should have been issued when they first came on board and you should both have a copy of it to be referred to, if necessary, during the meeting.

Be prepared

As a manager, you should arrange the meeting two or three weeks ahead. This gives you and the staff member ample time to prepare any comments and areas for discussion. Ask staff to spend time noting any matters they would like to deal with in the meeting. This allows employees to better prepare for it, by encouraging them think about relevant issues beforehand. It also helps to make them feel part of the overall process.

To credibly discuss performance, it is crucial to be specific about successful and unsuccessful performance. This shouldn't rely on information only remembered right before a meeting but rather, tracked throughout the year. The amount of specificity shows the staff member that the manager has been noticing, with either or both concern and appreciation how they have been going throughout the period under discussion.

When it comes to the day of the meeting, be prepared with the main matters you wish to discuss. After a meeting, be sure to follow up, summarise the discussion—and begin observations for the next discussion right away.

Choose a suitable location

Make sure you allow enough time for the discussion to be conducted properly and choose a private location, where you will not be interrupted by phone calls or other work-related distractions even if this means away from the office. Try to put the staff member at ease by having an informal chat beforehand and keep the discussion as non-intimidating as possible. Having a positive atmosphere is more likely to produce positive communication.



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Be positive, recognise achievements and acknowledge good performance

Acknowledge achievements and hard work. Start with the positives – things they have achieved and are doing well in the performance of their role. If they have been carrying an extra workload, acknowledge this and thank them. Offer praise where it is due and, if this is not their first staff development and performance discussion, discuss the areas where they have improved since the last one.

Be honest

It might sound like an obvious piece of advice, but a mistake managers make when discussing performance with a staff member is glossing over feedback to avoid confrontation. This doesn't help the staff member improve and puts a major roadblock in the way should a staff member need to be disciplined or fired at a later time.

An important part of the performance management process is the ability to conduct a “courageous conversation”. These are discussions that are sometimes challenging and are commonly thrown into the “too hard basket” and as a result they often don't occur at all. Courageous conversations are sometimes required when the stakes are high and professional relationships are threatened. Name up the issues with specific details and examples of performance. Focus on the behaviour and actions, in a firm but calm manner.

Engaging in difficult or courageous conversations is essential for effective leadership and management of successful organisations. Protecting employees from negative feedback or bad news does not benefit employees, or the wider organisation. Having the courage to confront and deal with people's emotions is the first step.

Showing empathy can be powerful. Listen to and recognize the person's feelings. Express understanding that they may be feeling angry or upset. Expect tears and offer tissues and/or a cup of tea if appropriate. Understand that the person may become defensive and things said in these conversations are not always said in a rational manner and are not always grounded in fact.

Be even-handed

Managers often have favourites, those people that they enjoy working with more and get along with better. That does not mean that the other employees did not do an excellent job. Nor does it mean that the “favourites” did a great job. In small organisations like Houses, work roles and friendship relationships can become blurred. This can have many benefits but it must not be at the expense of properly observing workplace roles and remembering your management responsibilities. In the workplace, even friends must be held to account.

Each employee should be considered on his or her own merits and performance throughout the time period under discussion. Of course, it should go without saying that discriminating on the basis of race, gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity etc. is illegal and should not occur.



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Focus on observable behaviours

When giving feedback focus only on directly observable behaviours. For example, use a statement such as "You were late back from lunch for the past 3 Fridays" rather than "I think you are out getting plastered every Friday". Focus on issues, not people.

By focusing on the behaviours you will be better placed to correct the issue. The second you drop into hearsay, assumption or generalisations - the power of your performance discussion sinks into the ground. Keep it specific, detailed and observed.

Put down the form

Many managers conduct a staff development and performance discussion simply by running down the required discussion form point by point. But this is the worst way to do it, as it does not open up a meeting for a genuine conversation. The form serves as a map to help keep the meeting on track and cover key points. But don't let it become a distraction.

Make it a natural conversation; it is not about completing forms. Documentation is necessary to properly prepare and follow-up, but the essence of the meeting is having a good one-on-one conversation about work and goals. The most important thing is not the piece of paper you're trying to fill out. Have an open and engaged discussion so that you can both be part of the problem-solving discussion.

Leave the form blank until the end of the meeting or even after the meeting's over. Then, after the meeting it can be completed as an agreed record of the meeting.

Shift the discussion to the employee

One of the best ways to have a successful, open discussion and review is to turn the tables and let the staff member do the reviewing. Encourage staff to think critically about their own performance. They may then be more receptive to your feedback and it also shows you whether they are clear on their role and what they're supposed to be doing.

You can better motivate staff and improve their capacity and performance by letting them assess their own work. Let staff suggest how they might improve their own performance. This might include further training, or perhaps altering some aspect of their job.

Similarly, you can open up the session to productive discussion if you ask the staff member to review your performance as well as his or her own. Discuss not only how a staff member has performed over the past months or year, but also what dilemmas and problems that person has faced—and how they handled them. You, and/or the House management structures might be part of the problem! Ideally you will both have a better understanding of why the staff member fared the way he or she did. From there, you can come up with ways for improvement all round.



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Find outlets for strengths

It's not enough to simply acknowledge that your employee is strong in certain areas. If you take the time to recognise them for being particularly talented without following up on it, at best it makes you seem like you aren't taking the meetings seriously and at worst that you don't care about them as people. A raise or promotion might send a powerful message, but just because you are in a flatly structured or tightly budgeted organisation doesn't mean there aren't ways to recognise and reward your employees. Try assigning an interest-oriented project or empowering them to teach and share their areas of excellence with others.

Discuss weaknesses in context

Look at any areas where performance may be lacking or where goals that were set in the last meeting have not been achieved. Be as specific as possible by pointing to actual instances where they have not been performing, rather than generalising and risking confusion, which can lead to defensiveness. Couch your comments and feedback as constructive feedback not negative feedback. After all, the outcome you want is to improved performance, not just a chance to criticise. The "feedback sandwich" is a useful method that can be adopted to give constructive feedback. This works by giving positive feedback first and last, and sandwiching the potentially challenging constructive feedback in the middle.

Remember and make sure to communicate that the discussion is about work performance and are not about personal attacks. You as the manager have your own responsibilities to the Management Committee, or in the case of the Management Committee, to the good of the [Name of House]. No matter how close the working relationships and friendships can become in a House, there is a time when those with management responsibility must put on their manager's hat. It's important to be clear that everyone has their part to play, and that this is about getting the job done right and in a timely fashion. With this understanding, you as the manager can point to the areas where staff may be falling short, discuss what might need to change, and ways to make that happen.

Listen

While it's important to enter into this process with clear thoughts about how you view the employee's performance and what you want them to focus on, don't prepare a monologue. Encourage the employee to contribute, and listen to what is said. The mere act of listening to their thoughts and asking thoughtful follow-up questions can provide the empowerment that facilitates the next step of their development. Be aware not to talk too much or dominate the meeting. Keep the conversation open-ended, and allow staff to respond to a manager's comments.

Work together to identify goals

If staff walk out of the meeting and don't agree that their goals and objectives make sense and can be achieved, then you have a problem. Establishing goals requires an honest conversation: you represent what you and the House needs, while they represent their



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interests and an innate understanding of their capabilities. You should come up with an arrangement that works for everyone. Agree on the key objectives and focus on solutions and opportunities. When setting objectives, check if they are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and with a Time frame (SMART). When objectives are SMART it is much easier (and fairer) to quantify whether an employee has achieved the objective or not.

Get a commitment to the goals and objectives from staff and record on the meeting form. If there is no agreement, which occasionally happens, the record of the meeting should show what was discussed and the details of any disagreement. This record may be important if the staff member subsequently needs to be disciplined or let go.

Consider development and training options

Discuss the employee's long-term career plans and aspirations. This will help both of you identify suitable development and training options. This should consider not just development areas specific to the job, but also areas that the employee wishes to develop in, which may lead to him or her being a more rounded employee in the workplace. This will help to make the employee more motivated for the upcoming period, if their development needs are being addressed properly. Sometimes the options will be to undertake training. Alternatively, it might be possible to give the staff member a different project to extend their skills and experience or to offer additional mentoring support. On some occasions, the staff member may need to be directed to undertake training to cover the expectations of their position.

Be accountable and follow up

A great way to undermine the effectiveness of your staff development and performance discussions is to set good goals and then never follow up on them. The follow-through on goals is deciding what indicates success, and the timelines for achieving it. Pick measurable objectives and actively measure if they have been reached. Don't wait for the next round of meetings. The work of Houses changes too quickly for annual or even semi-annual meetings to be effective as the only opportunities for feedback. Checking on achievement of goals and giving feedback needs to be regular throughout the year. Be prepared to deal with problems when they occur, rather than waiting for the next formal meeting.

Importantly, if you have agreed to help an under-performer, make sure that you do so. Initiate whatever steps you discussed with them to help them perform better. This is not only for the employee's benefit, but also to protect you. If you are forced to terminate the employee further down the track and you have not given them the opportunity to improve their performance, you may be open to a claim of unfair dismissal.



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WHAT TO AVOID

One of the best tools to boost productivity, increase morale and get better outcomes is an employee staff development and performance discussion ... if they are done correctly. Get them wrong and you risk losing your best staff.

These meetings are not a one way street. It should not be about sitting in a darkened room with a harsh light shining on an employee while you tell them for hours everything that is wrong with them. Many performance failures are the result of poor management, not poor worker skills or poor worker motivation, so be prepared to reflect upon your own role.

There are also some common problems encountered in implementing a staff development and performance discussion process. The cause of and the solutions to these problems usually rest with the managers and supervisors responsible for staff. Some of the most common problems to avoid are set out below.

No preparation.

Some managers like to do these meetings “on the fly.” The meetings are usually called on the spur of the moment: “Hey Sally, could you stop in my office for a sec?” The worst part of this kind of approach is that it typically means the manager hasn’t given any thought to how the staff member has done in the last year and what they need to do to improve. Even worse are the managers who simply cut and paste what was on last year’s meeting form to this year’s with minimal if any changes. The message sent to the staff member is “I’m very important and busy. I don’t have time to tell you how I think you’re doing at your job.”

The discussions never happen at all or “My door is always open.”

Some managers use the line: “Oh, my people know I have an open-door policy and they can come to me to talk about anything at any time. We don’t need a staff development and performance meeting.” However, in many cases, staff will say that they don’t go to the manager because he or she is always on the phone or looks too busy or they doubt the offer is genuine. They usually never take the manager up on the offer.

Recency effect.

Sometimes managers will overly focus on the most recent event as the basis for analysing the entire past year’s performance. So, if a staff member has made some mistake very recently that ends up being the entire topic of their performance meeting, despite their generally good performance over the rest of the year, they are victim of the recency effect. Some managers seem to have no memory, and only base their opinions on the most recent events.

It’s not about the forms

Staff development and performance discussions are not about the forms. They are about the discussion and the shared understanding.



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Too many processes focus on filling in forms, clicking on websites and filing paper. They totally miss the point! Forms are essentially a support document - they just summarise the discussion and the outcomes for the record. They are not an outcome in themselves.

It is really hard to listen and engage in conversation if you are focussed on writing things down! Focus on the person, the observable behaviours and the future goals and targets. If you have to - lose the paper until the end of the discussion if that makes it easier to focus on the person.

Too vague.

There are managers and supervisors who have 10 minute meeting with their staff, usually in the last week of the year. They're as brief as possible and give the staff no specific feedback on the work they've done in the last year. There's usually lots of "you're doing good work" and "keep it up" sprinkled in to the conversation. But how does a staff member take that as feedback and improve their job performance in the next year? Be specific about what is going well and where their performance could be improved.

No surprises

If your employee is surprised by your feedback during the discussion - you are the one who stuffed up! If you have done your job right during the year and had regular feedback sessions with your employee they should know exactly what you think of their performance. If you get to the formal meeting time and they are totally "gobsmacked" by your feedback, perhaps you need some communication training. Remember the "no surprises" rule during the year and the staff development and performance discussion will be much more productive.

Laid off workers often complain that they never saw it coming and then are bitter when they are let go because they're apparently no longer getting the job done. They point to previous glowing feedback on their performance and then suddenly being called into the manager's office to be told their job is on the line. It understandably upsets people when it becomes clear that the manager has been bothered by aspects of their performance, but never bothered to mention it or clarify it with them earlier.

No pats on the back.

It might seem like a simple thing, but lots of managers just don't give recognition to their staff when they do a good job. These days, everyone is busy and most people are over-worked and under-appreciated. Yet it is amazing how much people can put up with at work, as long as they get some genuine appreciation for their hard work every now and then. Managers (even co-workers) should regularly say thanks to people when they do a good job.



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No recognition for doing the work of 3 people.

More than just saying thanks, it's important to remember that increasingly staff are being asked to take on more responsibilities that would ideally be covered by an additional staff member. People can start to get burned out. A little thanks would go a long way. Many times though, managers say nothing. Extra work demands keep building up, committed staff pick up the slack, and life rolls on. Except that an undercurrent of resentment among staff can build up, especially when there is no recognition of the extra work load they are carrying.

Not being truthful with employees about their performance.

There are "nice guy" managers, who have a hard time giving staff negative feedback. There are also managers who never say anything good and only complain. Most people can handle the truth; they just can't handle inaccurate perceptions. And those who can't handle the truth should've heard it years ago but probably had lazy managers. If it's truthful and done constructively, most people can take honest feedback, even if it is critical. But if the manager is way off-base in his or her perceptions of a staff member's performance, it is maddeningly frustrating for the employee.

No discussion around the staff member's career ambitions.

Many people don't think a lot of their career path – whether they're a staff member or a manager. Yet, people need to be asked "What do you want to do?" or "Where do you want to go?" at every staff development and performance discussion. This encourages the employee to look him or herself in the mirror. If a staff member is feeling disgruntled and they are confronted with the question of where they want to progress to, they may realise they're not in the right spot in the current job. Others will use the discussion to soak up tips from the manager like a sponge and end up being much more engaged and motivated in their jobs.

No follow-up.

One of the most bureaucratic things about these formal meetings is the form that get filled out dutifully and filed. As part of every such meeting, there should be goals set for the coming year and recorded on the form. Some managers forget about these goals as soon as they've been completed. There's no mid-stream feedback on how they are doing in relation to the goals or tips from the manager on what to do to get back on track. Then, 12 months later, the old form gets pulled out from the file to be discussed again and new goals are set. To be effective, the goals have to be top of mind for both the staff member and the manager throughout the year.



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COMPLETING THE STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND PERFORMANCE FORM

Overview

The first page of the form contains an overview of the administrative details and a summary of the outcomes of the meeting.

- Check if the staff member is due for and entitled to an increment increase in salary.
- Record whether there is training that you require the staff member to undertake, either to improve their performance or to extend their capacities.
- Record whether there are training options that the staff member is interested in choosing from, and that you would support, if the training is available.
- Record the leave options identified by the staff member and any conflicts with the work calendar.
- Record the key responsibilities and outcomes for the staff member that have been discussed and agreed to in the meeting.

Record of Discussion and Feedback

This section of the form provides for recording notes of the discussion of key topics.

Achievements and Contribution

This is where you show appreciation for hard work that contributed to the work of the House and recognise the achievements of the staff member. Don't just say "Good work", but rather something like "I really appreciated all the effort you put into organising the garden club." Be specific. There should always be some achievements and contributions that you can genuinely and specifically refer to. If not, you (and the staff member) have a serious problem that needs to be dealt with.

Reflection on Work Experience

Commence this discussion by first asking the staff member to reflect from their point of view. Give them time to speak and genuinely listen. Help them get started by asking questions like:

- What have been your key accomplishments over the past year and what are the areas that you are disappointed in or concern you most? How well have you done?
- In our communication, what has worked well and are there any changes you would like?
- Are there any time management issues that have made a difference to your effectiveness in your role?



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- Given what you are working on, what do you see as your priorities for the next year?
- What are you offering to the House now that you were not offering a year ago?

Work Performance Strengths and Weaknesses

Once again, commence this discussion by first asking the staff member to reflect from their point of view. Give them time to speak and genuinely listen. If necessary help them get started by asking questions like:

- In relation to your personal strengths and weaknesses, what skills have you developed or what competencies have you improved or added to your role in the last six months?
- Do you see any areas of your job that you could do better in?

You should identify some key strengths that you have observed. If you need to bring up some weaknesses, remember the “feedback sandwich” technique. For example, you might say something like: “You did really well with organising and planning that project, well done!” Listen to what the employee says then point out something like, “There was that problem with the invitations going out late.” The employee will respond and you can provide your observations as well. Then, to finish up, you can say something like “Overall though, the project met its objectives and you should be proud of your involvement with it”.

Workplace Constraints and Solutions

Lead in with a question like:

- In general is there anything about House operations that you would like to see improved?

You can also be more specific, focussing in on the particular work that the staff member does, asking questions such as:

- Are there any things getting in the way of you doing your job properly?
- Do you have any suggestions from improving the way you can do your job?
- What can I do as your manager to help you do your job well?

You may also mention some constraints that you have identified (including any resulting from the staff member’s own way of working). Talk about solutions together.

Future Training and Support Needs

If there have been weaknesses or constraints on performance identified, one solution may be additional training. Discuss this with the staff member. You may both agree on this and readily identify what that training should be. In some cases, you may need to require that training be undertaken, even if the staff member is reluctant.

Training to broaden and extend the work of an already competent staff member could also be identified, to the benefit of both the staff member and the House. Identifying this type of training will possibly overlap with your discussion of future directions and career options.



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Future Directions and Career Options

Encourage the staff member to give serious thought to this. Ask questions like:

- What work would you like to be doing in three years' time?
- What are some interest areas you would like to develop further?

Review of Position Description and Classification

Together, go over the position description and cross check it against the actual work the staff member is doing. If it substantially matches, fine. If not, you need to either refocus the work of the staff member to align with the position description or consider revising the position description. If the work of the staff member has changed in a substantial way, you may need to consider reclassification of the position.

If any necessary change to the Position Description is made, provide the staff member with a draft of the new Position Description to comment upon before it is finalised.

Next Steps

In this section, record any agreed actions, whether is a work related task, or a course enrolment, or a behavioural change. What are the work goals for the next year, and what are the measurable outcomes of these goals? If possible always identify a timeline for commencement and completions of the action. Also identify an appropriate measure of success that will show that the action has been satisfactorily completed as intended. Include any comments that clarify what is required.

Summary Comments and Sign Off

Both the manager/supervisor and the staff member may wish to make some final comments on the discussion. In some cases, they may wish to record different opinions on the assessments made during the meeting and this should be provided for. It does not limit the exercise of a manager's or supervisor's legitimate authority to direct and control work responsibilities, monitor workflow, and give feedback on performance to assist staff to improve their tasks, their work performance, or the standard of their behaviour. However, if an employee has performance problems, these should be identified and dealt with by the manager or supervisor in a constructive way that is neither humiliating nor threatening.