

# Managing Individual Performance For Maximum Results

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## The Importance of Performance Management

How would you feel if your strongest performing employee were to give you a letter of resignation? How would you feel if you were handling specific work because a new employee wasn't managing his or her workload effectively? A solid performance management process can help motivate and retain that key employee and help you coach the employee who's performing below expectations.

Employee salaries are a sizable expense. It's smart business to provide regular feedback to individual employees. An understood and well-executed performance management system will allow you to provide feedback to enhance performance and to identify developmental steps to prepare employees for future positions.

Some managers conclude that they will simply terminate a poor performer. This may be an option if you've properly documented the performance problems. However, when you consider recruitment and retraining costs, it can be more cost effective to carefully manage the current employee by coaching him or her to strive for and achieve the desired performance standards.

## The Performance Management Process

You should conduct a formal, written performance evaluation at least once a year. This is an opportunity to:

- Assess how well the employee has performed in achieving agreed-upon objectives
- Identify strengths which should continue to be utilized



- Identify developmental areas to help the employee to meet and achieve expectations in the current role
- Identify developmental projects to prepare the employee for future career progression (if current performance is already meeting expectations).

Ideally, you are giving feedback throughout the year. Frequently, managers *intend* to provide ongoing feedback, but they fail to do so. To make this happen, you should schedule regular one-to-one meetings (every 2 – 3 weeks) with every person that directly reports to you.

These meetings provide:

- An opportunity to hear updates on how your employee is achieving specific objectives
- Timely feedback if there are specific aspects of the work (or their approach to the work) that are not meeting your expectations.

You should create documentation as you provide feedback during the year. This can be as simple as brief, written notes to yourself that include the date of the feedback. It will make the performance evaluation process much easier. If you do have an individual with ongoing performance issues, you will have the documentation you need to take disciplinary action. At the same time, you can and should provide positive reinforcement when the employee is doing well with specific projects.

It is imperative that you communicate “up front” with employees so they know the process and the timeline for performance management.

## Elements of a Performance Evaluation

The performance evaluation form itself can be simple or complicated. A simpler approach makes it more likely that you and your managers will make time to follow through with this process.

The most important elements of a sound performance evaluation form includes:

- **Name, position, date of hire, period of time being evaluated**
- **Goals** – You should assess goals that were identified and agreed to at the beginning of the performance evaluation

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period. Goals for individuals should tie into overall organizational goals. This will help employees stay focused during the year. These should be **Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound** (“SMART” goals) and should address key job responsibilities, projects, and career development goals. You should set a limit of 5 – 7 goals, and they should be prioritized. Each goal should be given a rating (for example: Exceeds Expectations, Meets Expectations, or Does Not Meet Expectations (E, M, D)).

- **Core Responsibilities** – These are the critical day-to-day responsibilities of a position (not already captured in the Goals section). You should use the same rating system (i.e., E, M, and D) referenced above for goals.
- **Areas of Strength** – These are demonstrated skills and competencies that are valuable and should be reinforced and encouraged.
- **Areas of Development** – After discussing the area(s) in need of improvement, if appropriate, you should strategize with the employee as to what development action can be taken (i.e., training, coaching, etc.)
- **Overall Summary** – This is an opportunity to summarize the employee’s contributions and his or her impact on your agency.

You should assess an employee with a rating in the areas that are most important for success in your organization. For example, you may value a number of behaviors including Customer Service, Teamwork, and Reliability/Dependability. Another agency may not value Teamwork since that isn’t crucial to success in their organization.

You should sign and date the evaluation and ask the employee to do the same. The employee should always be given the opportunity to respond in writing to the evaluation. Any written response should be attached to the

formal evaluation and kept in the employee’s personnel file.

On occasion, when an employee views his or her performance as significantly better than the manager’s written evaluation, he or she may refuse to sign the evaluation. If this occurs, you should simply note on the evaluation that the employee refused to sign and date it.

### Conducting the Evaluation Meeting

In preparation for the evaluation meeting, you should:

- Gather data about the performance period. You should review the objectives and results achieved. This may involve reviewing sales results, major accomplishments, and projects.
- Ask the employee to write a self-evaluation. This can be helpful because the employee may remind you of activities he or she was involved with that you’re not remembering. It will also let you know whether the employee has a very different perspective than you regarding his or her contributions and performance.
- Write your evaluation and be sure to give a balanced perspective. If another manager in the office could provide insights into the individual’s performance, you should solicit that input.
- Focus on *patterns of behavior* (rather than a single incident).
- Ensure that you have an office or meeting room available for the discussion, that you will not be interrupted, and that you’ve allowed ample time for the meeting.

During the performance evaluation meeting:

- You should acknowledge areas where you and the employee agree.
- For areas of disagreement, start with the areas that you rate higher and then discuss areas where performance is lower. It is important to note specific examples of the behavior you are highlighting. Ideally, you should have even more examples (if the employee is asking for

them during the discussion).

- Don’t rush the meeting, even though it may be difficult with certain employees. Don’t interrupt the employee while he or she is making a point. Active listening skills will allow you to understand the employee’s perspective.
- If the employee becomes emotional during the discussion, acknowledge that this type of conversation can be emotional. Use judgment regarding whether to give the employee a few minutes to regain composure. If necessary, close the discussion with plans to revisit it another day. In any event, do not change your assessment of his or her performance simply because the employee is upset.

### Final Considerations

Sometimes during these discussions, an employee will want to talk about his or her next career steps. Be careful not to make promises regarding what the next position will be or when that move might happen. Circumstances and performance may change over time.

In deciding your approach for performance management, carefully consider the type of organizational culture you want to foster. This process (and the evaluation form itself) should be consistent with that culture.

This investment of time and energy can reap significant dividends for your organization. Be sure to carve out time to implement a performance management process. It will be beneficial for your employees and it will further develop you and other managers in your organization. While managing employee performance is not an easy task, it can be quite rewarding.

Helen T. Cooke, PHR is managing director of Cooke Consulting Group, LLC in Haddon Heights, NJ. Her organization partners with management on a broad range of organization development initiatives. In addition, Cooke Consulting Group specializes in team development, executive coaching, creativity and problem solving, and employee mentor programs. Cooke Consulting Group’s clients include Johnson & Johnson, GlaxoSmithKline, and Aventis Pharmaceuticals.