

## Guide for Line Managers - Managing Underperformance

(The principles apply for other issues and 'difficult conversations')



When staff are not performing to the level needed it is important to tackle this early, quickly, fairly and effectively.

Most staff members do not come to work to do a bad job and there is usually a reason for their underperformance! This document has been designed as a quick reference guide to support you in getting the most from those you lead (and in the right way).

### What is underperformance?

Staff underperformance includes:

- Failure to perform their required duties or to perform them to the standard required.
- Non-compliance with school policies, rules or procedures.
- Unacceptable or inappropriate behaviour.
- Disruptive and consistent negative behaviour that impacts on other staff.

Underperformance is not the same as misconduct or criminal behaviour, which needs to be dealt with through the appropriate process, for example safeguarding and child protection.

### What might cause underperformance?

Common reasons include:

- Failing to set clear expectations, standards or goals, so staff members genuinely do not know what 'good' looks like.
- Failure to act on 'performance' issues, tackling them ineffectively, not having consequences for poor performance or lack of follow up. This may encourage repeat offences or show to others that it is OK.
- Staff having different behaviour preferences, doing things differently or having interpersonal differences.
- A mismatch between a staff members' capabilities and the requirements of their job.
- Staff members not having the knowledge or skills to do the job expected of them.



- Staff not being provided with feedback and not knowing whether they are doing an effective job.
- Behaviour of line managers, poor work environment, low morale or motivation.
- Personal issues, for example, family stress (relationships, caring, dependents), physical and/or mental ill-health, financial problems, etc.
- Use of drugs, alcohol or other stimulants.
- Lack of sleep.
- Cultural differences.
- Inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour, for example, bullying.

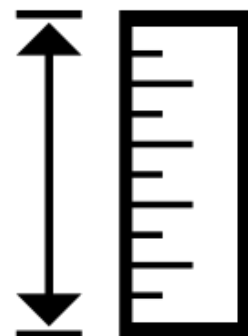
There are a wide range of potential causes and it is important to establish and identify what may be behind any underperformance you want to resolve. Effective preparation and a process will help you. You can use the five step process below to guide you.

### Step 1 - Identify the Issue (and what is causing it).

- What is the underperformance or issue. It must be measurable or quantifiable so be specific.
- Where is the evidence? It cannot be your view or an opinion. There must be explicit evidence that will demonstrate the level of underperformance or issue to be tackled.
- What is causing the underperformance or issue – refer to the list above and you may not know until you have asked the staff member questions.

### Step 2 – Establish the Impact.

- How serious is the level of underperformance or issue?
- How long has it been going on for?
- What is the impact on the staff member, colleagues, students and school? What message does it give to others?
- How big is the underperformance (the gap between what is expected and what is being delivered)?
- Does the staff member know about the issue?



Answering these questions will help determine the next step. Poor performance should not be passed by and ideally should be addressed quickly. However, working in a busy environment, taking these steps will help you prioritise the action needed.

Once steps 1 and 2 are completed, and providing you have the evidence to show the underperformance, schedule a meeting with the staff member.

You need to let the staff member know the purpose of the meeting in advance so they can adequately prepare. Depending on the nature and seriousness of the situation, you may need to do this through an initial 'short' meeting or discussion. If you hold regular meetings, then you can raise underperformance as it happens.

If the nature of the underperformance is serious or is repeated, you may want to allow the staff member to have a support person at the meeting. For example, this might be someone they trust or a union representative. This is likely to be a requirement if you enter a formal process for managing capability.

### Step 3 – Meet with the Staff Member.



Think about where you might hold the meeting to ensure it is private and confidential, the notice you need to give, and the time you need to make available for it. It must be away from distractions and interruptions and where the staff member will feel comfortable.

Begin by clearly setting out the purpose of the meeting and the underperformance that is to be discussed.

The staff member needs to know:

- What the underperformance or issue is.
- Why it's a problem.
- How it impacts on you, others (including students if relevant), and the school.

Use coaching skills (effective questioning and listening) to engage the staff member and to ask them for their view. This is why evidence is so important, because without it, you will find it difficult to hold the staff member to account.

The meeting should be an open discussion and the staff member given the opportunity to have their point of view heard and considered.

Ask the staff member what outcomes are needed to address the underperformance or issue. If they are able to identify this, they are more likely to own the performance improvement needed. However, you may need to add to or clearly set out the outcome needed, if the staff member cannot.

You should check the staff member

- Is aware that the level of performance or behaviour is something that is required of them.
- Understands the gap between what is happening now and what is required.
- Knows what or has been shown what is required.
- Has had the appropriate level of training and support.

Remember when holding the meeting:

- Do not take things personally or become emotional. If you recognise this is happening then take time out.
- Talk about their underperformance (their behaviour or failure to meet the standard) and not the person.
- Explore the reasons why there is underperformance – what is going on for them?
- Check understanding, clarify details and summarise appropriately.
- Stay calm, relaxed and encouraging.

In some meetings staff members may show their emotions and in different ways, for example they might cry or become angry. While this is not common it will happen and it is important to know how to deal with these situations in advance. Being prepared is the best way to deal with pressure.

For example, have tissues with you and if a staff member does cry or becomes emotional, then pause the meeting. Offer them time and a tissue, where relevant. After an appropriate time ask if they are ready to continue and they will usually be alright to do so. If not or the upset is significant then reschedule the meeting.

If someone becomes angry then let them speak and avoid interrupting. Then pause the interview until they are ready to proceed again. If you believe a staff member may become aggressive during your planning, then invite someone else to be part of the meeting.

#### Step 4 – The Solution

Ideally the solution should come from the staff member, with you providing support. This isn't always possible, but through sharing the evidence and asking effective questions, help them to identify options for improvement. When this happens, they are far more likely to 'own' it and step up to the performance level needed.



When working out a solution, you should:

- Ask open questions to pull ideas from them.
- Identify common ground.
- Keep the discussion focussed on the evidence and outcome.
- Where relevant offer assistance, such as training, development, coaching, mentoring, changing expectations or levels of responsibility.

The meeting needs to finish with the agreement of a clear action plan. There can be no grey areas or doubts as to what is expected.

This must cover:

- An agreement on the specific performance expectations and what is to be achieved (including clear roles and responsibilities where needed).
- When it is to be achieved (the timescales for improvement), and there may be the need for milestones. This needs to be realistic and give the staff member time to deliver the improvement needed.
- Any training or development and when it will be provided.
- The consequences (particularly for more serious or repeated issues) and next steps should the improvement not be made.

Make sure the action plan is clear and easy to follow and is written in simple and everyday English. You should also remind them of the value of the role they carry out and agree a date for following up with the next meeting.

Whether or not the solution(s) came from the staff member, or you had to tell them what was needed, you should always ask them the following or similar questions when agreeing the action plan.

- What have you understood from our discussion today?
- What will you do?
- When will you do it?
- What does success (or the improvement) look like?
- When will we review what we have agreed?

You should keep a written record of the discussion relating to the underperformance or issue and actions agreed. This will help with follow up and if you need to take the staff member down a capability route in future.

## Step 5 - Review



You should continue to regularly review the staff members' performance and provide feedback and encouragement.

Even if the staff member has improved their performance and met the agreed outcomes, you should still hold the follow up meeting. This means you can both acknowledge that the issue has been resolved. Often underperformance repeats because success has been declared too early, or because of a lack of follow up and review.

If the outcome expected hasn't been achieved, then more serious action may need to be taken, including further coaching, issuing of formal warnings, capability and ultimately termination of employment.

Finally, remember this is just a conversation. If you talk of difficult conversations, then acknowledge that is the label you have given it. Being clear on the outcome and preparing ahead of the meeting, will allow you to achieve the best outcome. If things do not go as planned, learn from it and be clear on what you will do differently next time

If you have any questions or would like support please

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