

WORKPLACE MENTOR SUPPORT SHEET 3: APPRAISING PERFORMANCE



It is recommended that you have a timely and effective appraisal procedure to ensure the successful development of your trainee. If you have implemented some of the techniques outlined in *Workplace mentor support sheet 1: Getting the best from your trainee* and *Workplace mentor support sheet 2: Providing development opportunities*, then this guide will help to equip you with best-practice advice on assessing your trainee's performance against any objectives set.

Key components of an appraisal procedure might include:

- preparing yourself and your trainee (before the meeting)
- giving feedback
- handling poor performance
- rewarding achievement and forward planning.

As performance objectives set are likely to have taken into account not just development needs but also how your trainee's role fits into the business, the appraisal should also give you the opportunity to review your trainee's performance in relation to organisational goals.

PREPARING YOURSELF AND YOUR TRAINEE

Even if you have regularly been reviewing your trainee's progress, providing encouragement and giving feedback, a number of steps can be taken to ensure an effective appraisal. Many employers have standard appraisal forms that are used throughout the workforce, completed by the trainee and submitted prior to the appraisal. However, these forms need not be time-consuming or complex to create, as they simply need to record the following:

- your trainee's self-assessment of what has and hasn't gone well including which methods of gaining experience were the most effective
- the issues over which you and your trainee are broadly in agreement – and those where there is a difference of opinion – giving you the opportunity to prepare yourself
- areas of responsibility or skills your trainee would like to further develop
- issues to which you may have to respond – but note that some people may be reluctant to commit negative views to paper, so some grievances may be raised in the meeting without warning.

You might also wish to seek the views of colleagues who may have coached or seconded your trainee, allowed themselves to be shadowed, or seen your trainee in action on projects or in workshops.

GIVING FEEDBACK

Appraisal meetings are most effective when they follow a structured agenda. Therefore planning in advance will mean a more orderly meeting with a clear agenda and an enthusiastic appraisee. With this in mind, go through the performance objectives and your

trainee's appraisal form methodically. At the outset, restate the purpose of the appraisal – to assess achievement of performance objectives and plan the next stage of your trainee's career development. The list below provides some useful tips to remember when giving feedback.

- Where deserved, remember to give praise – but occasionally ask what the trainee might do differently next time to deliver an even better performance.
- If the dialogue diverts away from the agenda, keep returning to the objectives.
- Be prepared to disagree – there's no reason to sanction everything your trainee says or thinks.
- The role of a workplace mentor is about more than simply teaching someone how to carry out a job – you are also a source of encouragement and support so it is important to recognise effort and commitment as well as end results.
- Look for signs of reticence and be receptive. People often avoid uncomfortable topics, particularly those involving colleagues or sensitive subjects.

Your feedback is invaluable for your trainee's development. Even if you talk regularly in the office, appraisals have a unique, specific dynamic. What you say will be deliberate, purposeful and personally focused, rather than passing comments that may not be fully integrated.

HANDLING POOR PERFORMANCE

You may have to deal with unsatisfactory aspects of your trainee's performance. Using open questions you can guide your trainee to a realisation of how better performance might have been achieved. It's important not to ignore problem areas in an effort to make the appraisal a wholly positive experience, objectives won't be achieved without relevant corrective action.

However difficult it is for trainees to hear uncomfortable truths, in many instances they will be aware of their own shortcomings. Where performance has been below expectations, a benefit of giving honest feedback is that your trainee is likely to be eager to do a much better job next time and may approach you more readily about potential obstacles in the future. Well-intentioned, constructive criticism is part of helping your trainee improve.

REWARDING ACHIEVEMENT AND FORWARD PLANNING

Depending on any existing development programme, performance objectives may be linked directly or indirectly to promotions and salary reviews. Whether or not this is the case, it's advisable for achievements to be recognised. The following provides some ideas for how to reward achievement.

- Add your own comments to the appraisal form and ensure your trainee receives a copy – be sure that any positive comments from the meeting are recorded; words of praise in print carry much more credit and give your trainee a tremendous boost in confidence.
- Certificates, company awards and name-checks in employee newsletters are all valid ways of recognising your trainee's achievements.
- Although an official promotion may not be the next step, look for ways in which your trainee can see their ideas put into action, or more actively involved in certain decision-making processes.

Together with your trainee, plan what happens next. An effective appraisal will generate agreed action points, although you may need to consult colleagues before making certain decisions. Think about how future development of your trainee fits with your objectives and with plans for others in your team.

A critical factor with next-step plans – especially those that arise from individual performance appraisals – is that they are implemented and followed up. One of the most common complaints jobhunters make about employers is failure to deliver on development commitments. It's the easiest way to lose good people so don't allow good intentions to become empty promises.

For each action you plan, set specific timelines and diarise not just your own tasks but those of your trainee. Reminders in the weeks that follow the appraisal will not be unwelcome but instead will signal to your trainee that you take their development seriously.