HR Guide – Performance Counselling

Purpose

These Performance Counselling Guidelines are intended to provide managers with advice and support for managing consistent and/or serious performance issues through performance counselling and action planning with a view to improving performance.

This guideline does not apply where:

- There are issues that a manager would normally address as part of the usual, day-to-day performance planning and management feedback process
- In cases of suspected misconduct

Where performance counselling is not successful in addressing a serious or consistent performance issue, disciplinary action may be appropriate.

This guideline applies to all permanent full-time and part-time, fixed-term and long-term casual employees of the organisation.

What is a performance issue?

Employees are expected to perform their work in a manner which is consistent with the company's values, and their agreed performance goals or position description.

Where an employee consistently fails to meet performance standards or a serious performance issue arises, it is the manager’s responsibility to address this quickly. The intention or goal is for the employee to improve their performance to an acceptable standard. If a manager does not address a performance issue appropriately it may be felt by the employee that the manager is happy with the current level of performance.

Examples of serious or sustained performance issues include:

- Continued inability to deliver on agreed goals or standards
- Swearing or inappropriate behaviour in the workplace
- Consistent and unexplained absenteeism or lateness
- Ongoing non-adherence to safety procedures or work instructions

Document and understand the issue

Prior to addressing the performance issue with the employee, the manager should collate all relevant facts and information, and consider the issue carefully. Relevant information may include:

- Specific examples of the performance issue including dates and times
- Frequency and/or severity of the problem
- Effect on the employee’s performance goals
• Impact on the workplace or colleagues, customers or clients
• Any previous occasions when the manager has addressed the issue with the employee and any agreed outcomes of those meetings

This information may be required for ‘evidence’ in discussions with the employee and to prove the reasonableness and fairness of the manager’s actions at a later date. It is important that the manager stays objective during the process.

Performance counselling session

This is a chance to address a performance issue(s) with the employee with a view to improving their performance.

The manager should organise a performance counselling meeting with the individual to:
• Describe the performance issue and why this level of performance is an issue
• Determine whether the employee knows what is expected of them
• Ask whether there are any extenuating circumstances
• Ensure that sufficient resources, support and training have been provided
• Agree and document the agreement in a performance improvement plan

During the performance counselling meeting the manager should:
• Be firm but fair
• Ask open questions
• Take notes
• Use active listening
• Summarise what has been said for mutual understanding
• Consider the employee’s responses
• Encourage the employee to speak freely, yet bring them back to the specific issue in question should they become sidetracked.

Moving Forward and Documentation

During a performance counselling meeting the manager and employee should agree on what is needed to work towards the required levels of performance. The manager should document in a performance improvement plan the conversation and any agreed next steps.

The action plan should be very specific and include:
• Goals, targets and standards to be met
• Actions required
• Who will perform the action
• Agreed dates for review and follow up

The manager should make it clear that they are willing to provide the appropriate support to address the issue and improve performance.
However, the manager also has an obligation at this stage to inform the employee that failure to improve performance in line with the agreed expectations may lead to disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment.

To prevent misunderstanding and to give the employee a clear path to follow, the manager should record the outcome(s) of the meeting along with the agreed action plan. The action plan should be signed by both the manager and the employee.

Monitor and Review

Follow up reviews can take place on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis, depending upon the type of performance issue.

The Manager should follow up with the employee to either:

- Acknowledge the employee’s improved performance; or
- Where performance is not improving as expected, re-address the specific issues with the employee

Next Steps

Where there has been sustained improvement in the employee’s performance by the end of the review period, the manager should acknowledge this. If improvement is not made within a reasonable period of time in line with expectations, or improvement is not sustained, the manager may consider disciplinary action. In addition, the manager may limit pay increases or terminate the employment contract.