workwell
human resources
Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, working with you, working together

Section 05:

Communicating for Performance

STRONG HERITAGE | STRONG FUTURE
RHONDDA CYNON TAF
TREFTADAETH GADARN | DYFODOL SICR

Managing performance is absolutely critical to delivering quality services for the residents of Rhondda Cynon Taf, and one of the most fundamental elements of managing performance is communicating clearly and effectively with each and every member of your team.
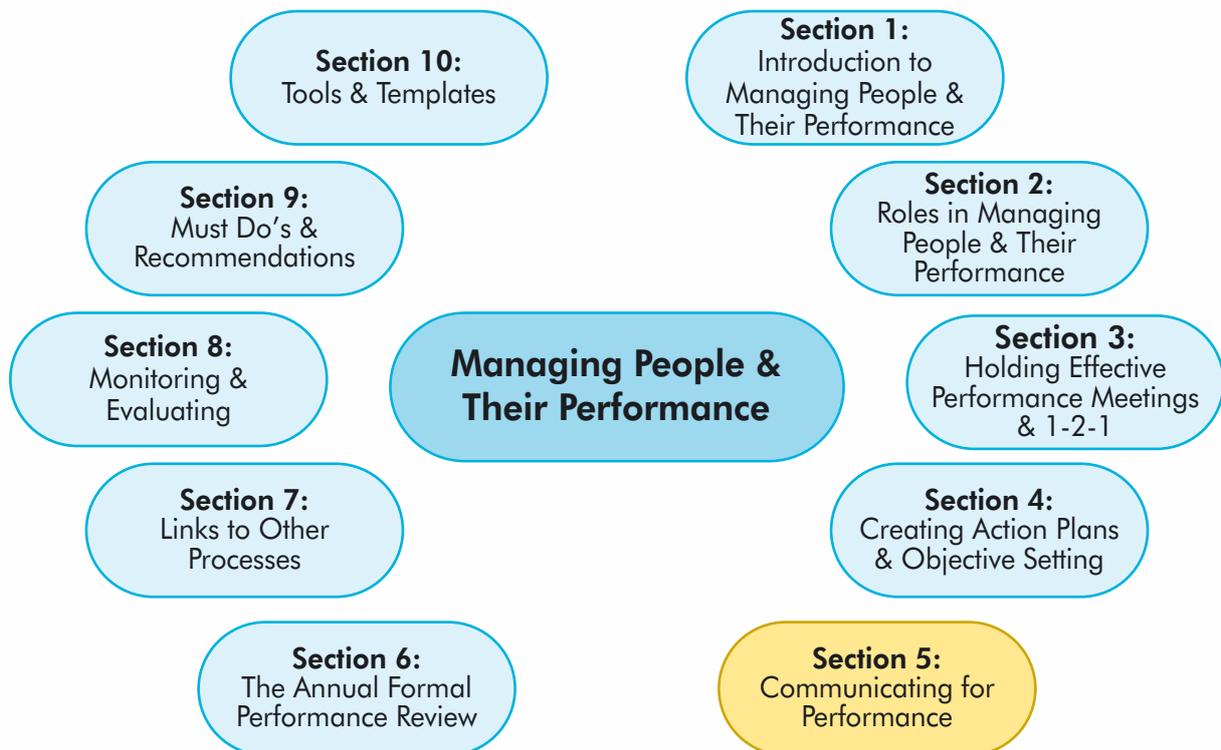
The purpose of this section is to focus on effective communication in relation to performance and to help you manage some of the more difficult areas. For example, how do you bring performance issues to the attention of an individual without completely de-motivating them or making them feel as though they can't do anything well? How do you keep those individuals who are performing exceptionally well continuously performing in this way? How do you tackle highly sensitive or highly contentious issues?

Effective communication is something that cannot simply be taught – it has to be practised. As a manager, you know what needs to be communicated but the key to communicating this effectively is in "how" you do it. This section of the toolkit will look at:

- General Communication
- Giving Feedback
- Having Difficult Conversations

TIP...

In your Line Manager role there will be certain functions that are mandatory and other functions that, although not mandatory, are considered good practice. Each section of the toolkit will summarise these areas on the final page. Please note – the must do's at the end of this section are those from section 5 only. A summary of all 'Must Do's' and 'Recommendations' from all Sections can be found in Section 9.

Section 10:
Tools & Templates

Section 1:
Introduction to Managing People & Their Performance

Section 9:
Must Do's & Recommendations

Section 2:
Roles in Managing People & Their Performance

Section 8:
Monitoring & Evaluating

Managing People & Their Performance

Section 3:
Holding Effective Performance Meetings & 1-2-1

Section 7:
Links to Other Processes

Section 4:
Creating Action Plans & Objective Setting

Section 6:
The Annual Formal Performance Review

Section 5:
Communicating for Performance

General communication

Effective communication is a key management tool that has a significant impact on your team on a daily basis, not just during performance discussions.

As well as thinking about the who, what, why, when and how of what you want or need to communicate, you should also consider the following points:

Make it timely
Communication is most effective when it is relevant to the current situation. Most of us want to know and be made aware of information that has a direct impact on us as individuals or the work we do as soon as possible. Most of us feel annoyed or disappointed when we perceive we are the last person to know something that affects us personally. In a lot of cases, particularly where the issue is of a sensitive nature or will involve a significant change for an individual or group of individuals, communicating after the event can be incredibly damaging to morale, engagement and trust between you and your team.

Be honest
Honesty is the only policy. When communicating any information in the workplace base it on factual information rather than your personal interpretation of the facts. If you do not have all the information available to you, or if you are unable to answer questions that your team raise, then say so.

TIP....
Avoid "sugar coating" messages that may be difficult to hear or putting a "positive spin" on it – your team will almost certainly see through the smokescreen.

Keep it simple and straightforward
What you say is often not what others hear as information tends to become distorted by the assumptions, attitudes, values and beliefs held by each individual. To avoid messages becoming diluted or misinterpreted, keep it as simple as you can.

Listen and acknowledge
All communication is two way. There is nothing worse than having a discussion with someone whether it be work related, family related or just about the weather, and realising that the person you are having the discussion with is (a) not listening and/or (b) so disengaged they do not even acknowledge the points you are raising with them. This does not mean that you have to agree with everything that's being discussed, acknowledgement is about taking on board what the individual is saying and understanding their feelings or opinions about the issue being debated. Then you can respond.

Be aware of signs of non-verbal communication
The tone of someone's voice, the language they use, and the words they don't say can be as important as what is actually being said. Have you ever been surprised or even hurt by the way someone has spoken to you? Very often it was not the actual words they said that made you feel this way but the way they were said.

Likewise in some conversations, it's not the tone of voice that's used but the emotive use of language that can help you understand the way someone is feeling about a discussion. For example, "I bitterly resent ….." or "I am deeply unhappy about…."

Giving Feedback

Feedback is an essential element of individual development and enhanced performance. However, the way you deliver feedback to members of your team is critically important in terms of motivating individuals, boosting individual and team morale, and in engaging your team in delivering high quality services.

Done badly, feedback can have a significant negative impact on all of the above and in some of the worst cases leave employees and entire teams completely de-motivated and disengaged.

What to avoid	What to do more of
Meeting up once a year at a performance review meeting to discuss the performance of the past 12 months. Chances are you won't be able to remember what happened and the individual won't necessarily associate the feedback you are providing with the work completed.	Have regular meetings to discuss individual performance. Feedback is much more effective when it is given in relation to a specific event or completion of a specific piece of work. Wherever possible have regular de-briefs after events, important meetings, or project work to discuss what went well and what could have been done better.
Avoid generic statements such as "Your work is fine" or "You are always missing deadlines or making mistakes in your work". This is of little use to anyone and can be perceived as blaming the individual.	Be specific. Give examples to support your feedback and explain why it was positive/not so positive. For example "Your analysis of this survey data was thorough and precise. As a result your work on this project can serve as a model for similar projects. I'd like you to take the lead on the next survey we do". This can be highly motivating for individuals.
Where there is a performance issue, be objective. Avoid picking the individual up on every little thing that they may not have done to your satisfaction as a means of justifying the feedback you want to provide.	Clearly identify the performance issue that you want to discuss and keep focussed on it. Explain the impact this has on the team/service and be clear about what improvement is required, what support you will provide and the timescales within which you would like this to be achieved.
Don't assume you know the reasons why the individual is not performing to the standard expected. It may be that the individual did not know what was expected of them, misunderstood what they were required to do, etc.	Encourage the individual to discuss why they approached a piece of work in the way that they did, or to explain to you what they thought was required of them. If there was a genuine misunderstanding, acknowledge this fact and discuss ways that both of you will find helpful in avoiding the same misunderstandings arising in future.

Difficult Conversations

It is human nature that we find giving positive feedback much easier than negative feedback. After all, who wants to be the bearer of bad news that maybe upset members of their team? In some instances it may even be possible to ignore the poor performance in the short term and work around it by allocating key tasks to other members of the team. However, this is the most certain way of creating tension, frustration and bad feeling within your team. As Line Manager, it is your role to manage and enhance performance on a day-to-day basis.

This section of the guide sets out practical ways of approaching these conversations. However, if you would like further practical support please contact Human Resources.

In any conversations, the first few moments can have a major influence on the remainder of the conversation and the desired outcome of the discussion. Getting the tone wrong or opening up the conversation inappropriately can put an individual in an immediate defensive situation, which may result in a less productive conversation from your perspective.

Consider the following points:

Be prepared
This is not the same as preparing a script for the discussion! A conversation is a two way discussion so you need to be prepared to explore issues, feelings and concerns that arise during the course of the discussion.

You may find it helpful to jot down your opening sentences beforehand so that you set the context for the discussion. You may also want to jot down the points you want to raise with the individual as a prompt so that you remember to cover everything during the meeting.

Make sure you have specific examples of performance or behaviours that you have observed, or that have been brought to your attention, to illustrate the feedback you will be giving.

Starting the conversation
Conversations are often started with a general opening question such as "How do you think you have been performing over the past x months?" or "How do you feel the project went?" The hope is that this will allow the individual to open up and then allow you to turn the conversation around to the area of concern that you have. However, this approach is rarely effective as it can have the following effects:

- It can allow the individual to talk about all the positive things that they have done. This leaves you in a difficult situation insofar as you then either have to acknowledge all these positives before raising the issue that you want to address which can undermine the impact of your feedback, or you have to openly disagree with the individual which can cause tension.

- If the individual senses that you want to raise an issue about their performance they may deliberately avoid the issue or become very defensive which makes it almost impossible for you to continue with an open and constructive discussion. Opening the conversation in this instance with a direct "I want to talk to you about… ."prevents the individual avoiding the issue.

Select a specific example, or couple of examples, that illustrate the area of performance you want to address. The key here is to take time to think of an example that covers the full range of the issue you want to address and ensures that the individual is in no doubt as to what you are talking about. Identifying dozens of examples to illustrate your feedback will be counterproductive and can be totally demoralising, leaving the individual feeling as though everything they do is useless.

Try to keep the examples as succinct as possible and avoid long detailed descriptions of what you have observed or what has been reported to you. Wherever possible use "I…" statements rather than "you…" statements. For example, "I observed that the report was submitted a week late….." rather than "you did not get the report in on time…." as the latter statement suggests the individual is to blame.

However, don't dress up the feedback to try to "soften the blow". In the long term this can leave the individual confused and unsure about their performance. It is far more effective to get to the point, and be clear and calm about what improvement is required and how this can be achieved.

Avoid the "sandwich"

This is a popular yet totally ineffective way of giving feedback. The approach suggests that you start with some positive feedback, slip in the constructive feedback that you wish to give and then end the discussion with more positive feedback.

The effect of this approach is that the real message gets lost. The individual can selectively choose which bits to remember/focus on and may not therefore appreciate the importance of the constructive feedback. On the flip side, if you use this approach on a regular basis, the positive feedback can also lose its impact as the individual will be waiting to hear the "negative" feedback that they assume will follow. This can have a disastrous effect on the individual's confidence.

Describe your emotions about the issue

It's ok to describe how you feel about this issue. This does not mean you have to give a detailed personal disclosure! It may simply be telling the individual that you feel uncomfortable giving this feedback or discussing their behaviour, or it could be that you are concerned, annoyed, frustrated or worried about the issue. Sharing how you are feeling can have a powerful effect on the individual and in some cases can be the point at which they take real notice of what is being said.

Clarify the impact the issue has on your service area

When giving feedback, being clear about the impact this issue has not only on you and the individual, but the wider team and your Service area, is really powerful. This can encourage the individual to reflect on how their performance and behaviour is affecting their close colleagues. It can also have a positive impact on the individual as it can help them see that this is not just an issue that impacts on you and can deflect any tension or ill feeling that would otherwise be directed at you.

Your role

In such discussions, you should ask yourself what you have done or not done that has contributed to the issue. This may simply be that in the past you have not highlighted the behaviour or focussed attention on what is required or expected of the individual. It could be that you have let small issues build up to the point where something must now be done.

Acknowledge your contribution to the issue and discuss ways to avoid this happening in the future with the individual. This may be uncomfortable for you to do at first but the whole point of these discussions is not to apportion blame or to come out of the conversation as the "winner" – it's about resolving the problem and securing a "win-win" situation for you , the individual and the team. Possible solutions may include a simple agreement to sit down with the individual before they begin any piece of work and discuss what is required in detail, or it may be that a separate meeting is required to go through the individual's job description and discuss what this means in terms of goals, objectives and performance standards.

Resolve the issue

Raising the issue with the individual is all well and good but once it is brought out into the open it needs to be properly addressed and resolved. At this stage, you are not entering into the area of invoking the Council's disciplinary or capability procedures, and it is appropriate for you to state this clearly at this point. You simply want to improve the performance of the individual and ensure you are both clear about what is expected in the future.

Providing relevant and appropriate support is absolutely crucial at this point.

Invite the individual to respond

Throughout this guide, the point has been made that communication is a two way discussion. In discussing any performance or behavioural issue, once you have outlined the position as you see it, and this should take no more than a couple of minutes, you should invite the individual to respond to the issue you have raised….and then you must listen, acknowledge and take on board what is being said.

Manager Checklist

Must Do's

Action	Completed
Recognise that effective communication is a key management tool	
Hold regular 1-2-1 meetings with the individuals you manage to discuss performance, progress against objectives, general work issues etc. Use the Notes form 1-2-1 Meetings form to plan and keep records from these meetings.	
Make conversations timely	
Prepare for performance meetings	
Address issues as they arise in 1-2-1 meetings – do not avoid having difficult conversations	
Be honest and use factual information to illustrate points	
Give the individual the opportunity to talk / respond and ensure you actively listen to what they have to say	
Hold regular team meetings to discuss performance, communicate progress, communicate change etc	
Keep your own record of outcomes from 1-2-1 meetings (See 1-2-1 Meeting template, Section 10)	
Discuss and identify the development needs of those you manage and set up development plans that address the development needs that impact upon the delivery of objectives	

Recommended

Action	Completed
Think carefully about the timing of meetings and where they are held	
Try to keep the message simple	
For support and guidance contact Human Resources or your Line Manager	