Having a Constructive Conversation

Guidance

Guidance – Having a Constructive Conversation

Introduction

The Managing and Supporting Performance Policy sets out a process for addressing issues of underperformance. The Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) is a core element of this process, providing a structured template for guiding and recording performance related discussions.

To be effective, such discussions should be carried out in a supportive and constructive manner. This note provides additional guidance to support managers in holding constructive conversations and is intended to complement the following guidance notes:

- Guidance – Using the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP)
- Guidance – Managing Performance Informally
- Guidance – Setting SMART Objectives
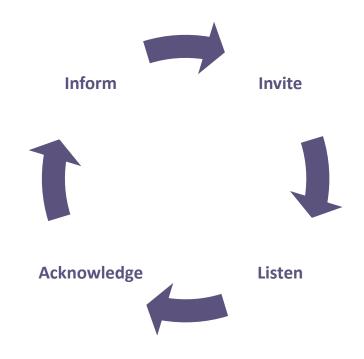
Preparing for a Constructive Conversation

Managers should prepare in advance by thinking about what they are ultimately trying to achieve through the discussion and planning out the issues they intend to cover, as well as the questions that they plan to ask. This can help to ensure that the meeting is as productive as possible for both the manager and employee. Guidance notes such as this one, as well as others in the Managing and Supporting toolkit, can be read in advance (and referred to during meetings) as required. Similarly, for meetings which require it, the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) itself is designed to help guide the conversation.

An appropriate venue should be used, providing a quiet and confidential area to hold the conversation. Managers should also collect and prepare any evidence or documentation to which they plan to refer during the conversation.

Stages of a Conversation

The structure of a conversation can seem obvious at first, however the success of the conversation can be influenced by a wide range of factors, including the skill and awareness of those involved.

One simple but helpful model is highlighted below. This shows an effective conversation cycle across 4 distinct stages:

Inform   **Invite**

Acknowledge   **Listen**

More detail on each stage is provided below:

Inform

Provide information or an explanation, so that the employee knows what the discussion is focussing on, or what is coming next etc.

Example – "I'd like to discuss your performance over the last month"

Invite

Ask a question relevant to the information given at the inform stage in order to seek input from the employee and to bring them into the conversation.

Example – "How do you feel you have performed over that period?"

Listen

Actively listen, to the employee's response. Utilising non-verbal communication while the speaker is talking, such as maintaining eye contact and nodding may help the speaker feel more at ease and confident that what they are saying is being heard and understood. A degree of interruption can be appropriate here in order to ensure a point is understood, although interruptions should not be to an extent that they detract from the employee being given the chance to respond.

Acknowledge

Having listened to what the employee had to say on a given point of discussion, managers should demonstrate that they have listened and understood by acknowledging what was

said. Language such as "Ok, I understand" or "I appreciate that" alongside a degree of paraphrasing/feeding back can help to acknowledge what was said.

Example – "From what you have said, I understand that you believe you have been performing well over the period in question however if we can take a look at these reports, they show…[Conversation moves back to Inform stage]"

The above cycle repeats until the conversation is concluded. Whilst a simple model it should be noted that it can be easy to stray from this pattern by, for example, repeating the 'Inform' stage alone and not offering the opportunity for others to input, or by inviting the views of others only to then skip the 'Listen' and/or 'Acknowledge' steps and making others feel like their input is not welcome or valued.

Having a Constructive Conversation

Knowing the stages of a conversation is helpful, however the finer detail of what is said within each stage is key to ensuring the conversation is constructive. This section explores this in more detail, looking at the key aims a manager will have during a performance related conversation (in line with the associated policy and guidance) and the nature of the questions they may want to ask. The conversation cycle (described above) would repeat throughout and the noted questions, for example, would sit within the 'Invite' step each time they are asked.

When it comes to asking questions, it is generally advisable to use open questioning throughout (i.e. questions which usually start with 'How?', 'What?', 'Where?', 'Who?' and 'When?') as these encourage two-way dialogue and are more likely to secure buy-in from the individual involved. Questions starting with 'Why?' should be used sparingly and only if necessary as these often press individuals into giving defensive responses. Similarly, closed questions (e.g. Did you…?) should also be kept to a minimum, for example when confirming a point of detail.

Further considerations are outlined below:

Check Understanding

It is often a good idea, early on in the discussion, to offer the employee the opportunity to reflect and feedback on how they perceive their own performance. This can be as simple as asking the individual how well they believe they have been performing over the period of time in question in order to open up the conversation. It may also be appropriate to shift the focus of the discussion onto specific elements of the role depending on the nature of the performance issue, as performance is unlikely to be uniform across the role.

This initial part of the discussion is vitally important in establishing the employee's own awareness of any identified performance issues and sets the tone for any follow up discussion.

Confirm or Challenge

Having established an employee's awareness of their own performance, the discussion can then move forward and start looking ahead at what is required in order to bring about an improvement. Where the individual is already aware of their own levels of performance, then managers should confirm that they agree with their observations and reflect on examples as appropriate to ensure full understanding of the problem. Where an individual is not aware of their own levels of performance, then managers should offer additional feedback (alongside examples and evidence where possible) to explain why they have reached that particular conclusion and to support the employee in understanding the nature of the performance issue. Using open questioning at this part of the discussion can be particularly helpful to ensure that the identified issues are explored in an open and constructive manner. Additionally, managers should avoid using absolutes such as "always" or "never", and instead consider words such as "frequently" or "rarely" if appropriate to the circumstances.

It may not always be possible to reach full 'agreement', however this stage should reach a point where the individual understands the nature of the issues (and has had the chance to talk them through and provide their own responses via constructive two-way dialogue). These first two elements of the discussion sit with the 'Summary of Performance Issues' element of the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) in particular.

Provide Support

Having jointly reflected and summarised the performance issue, the conversation can progress to exploring any potential barriers or other factors which may be impacting on performance. This aligns with the 'Reasons/contributory factors affecting performance' section of the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP).

Using a coaching style of conversation, managers should again use open questions to ensure that a supportive approach is taken to jointly identifying any barriers, tapping into the employee's knowledge of their own needs in order to identify appropriate supports or adjustments.

Managers may consider asking questions along the lines of the following:

- What support do you need to improve your performance?
- What barriers are there to you improving your performance?
- What are you currently doing which allows you to perform at a high level?
- When you have faced a similar challenge in the past, how have you dealt with it?

<u>Agree Actions</u>

Having discussed the identified issue(s) as well as any barriers or influencing factors, the focus can then shift onto the steps or actions required in order to improve performance to the expected level. This relates to the remaining parts of Part A of the Performance Improvement Plan (PIP).

A coaching style would again be useful at this stage, using open questions to facilitate a constructive discussion when identifying improvement objectives. This might include asking questions such as "What do you believe you need to do in order to improve in this area?" in order to invite suggestions from the individual themselves, then providing feedback in order to refine any suggestions into a SMART objective (see Guidance – Setting SMART Objectives). Setting objectives in this way would be the preferred approach in order to ensure agreement and buy-in from the individual, however in some circumstances it will be appropriate for the manager to set more direct objectives.

The same coaching approach, using open questions, can be used to follow up on each objective as appropriate, for example:

- How will we know you have achieved this objective?
- When do you believe would be a reasonable timeframe for completion of this objective?

Whilst the manager will ultimately set the objectives, doing so in the above way in conjunction with the individual involved can ensure strong agreement and therefore an increased likelihood of the objectives being achieved.

<u>Ongoing Review</u>

As outlined in the policy and other guidance documents, the Performance Improvement Process will typically involve a cycle of follow up review meetings. The same approach, outlined in this guidance note, can be similarly applied throughout these review meetings to ensure that constructive conversations continue.