

Informal Meetings – Additional Guidance for Managers

Introduction

This guidance does not form part of a specific HR policy but is designed to give guidance on good management practice.

Where there are concerns about a member of staff's attendance, job performance, behaviour or conduct, line managers are expected to **manage issues informally before embarking on formal processes** under the relevant employee policy. In exceptional cases where the matter is so serious, or there are repeated concerns, it may be necessary to go direct to formal processes. In such cases line managers must seek guidance from HR without delay.

It is possible for most issues to be resolved promptly and informally through discussion, advice and guidance or coaching.

The line manager should invite the employee to disclose any underlying issues so that they can consider what support may be available. For example there may be underlying reasons such as skill level, personal and domestic issues, bullying, or health reasons or drug or alcohol issues. Encouraging the employee to discuss these will assist the line manager to offer or signpost support. It is important to consider if there is a disability, what adjustments may be reasonable, such as additional training or special equipment or software.

Regular one-to-one meetings offer an opportunity to discuss concerns with the employee. Written notes of one-to-one meetings provide a record of any support offered; expectations set and any improvements needed.

However, if there are performance concerns and these have not been addressed appropriately at one-to-one meetings, line managers should meet **informally** to raise these with the employee without delay. The line manager should indicate the purpose of the meeting to the employee in advance.

The now or never moment

Sometimes issues crop up without warning, but more often than not there are warning signs. **If a manager does not “act now” then it may give the impression there is no problem and it also denies the employee a chance to improve.** Failing to act can be damaging to the effective working of the University and lower morale amongst other team members.

Preparation for an informal meeting

Conducting a meeting to discuss unsatisfactory behaviour, attendance or performance is never an easy task, whether informal or formal. Preparation is important to gather facts and plan for the meeting, including possible causes of poor behaviour or performance.

This could be:

- The employee's personal motivation in the role
- Training needs specific to the role
- Ineffective systems of work/procedures
- Insufficient or inadequate supervision or support
- Lack of understanding about the duties, priorities or goals
- Unrealistic deadlines
- Mental or physical ill health or disability
- Personal problems or relationships with colleagues

The line manager should gather specific examples of poor performance, behaviour or attendance, with supporting documentation where it exists. This can be useful to expand upon a point, and will refresh people's memories of the facts.

Practical tips for managers preparing for an informal meeting

An informal meeting is one which the line manager holds on a one-to-one basis. It is not appropriate for the employee or manager to be accompanied at such meetings.

Book a private room where you can have an open and frank conversation and where you will not be interrupted – face to face is better than on the phone.

Allow time for a break to compose yourself or check facts; allow a break between meetings which may be “draining”.

Think about room layout – opposite with a table between you is formal; sitting next to someone looks less threatening; consider your own well-being and the ability to adjourn if the situation may become volatile.

Consider how you will manage your own emotions at the meeting to avoid becoming embroiled in a heated exchange. Anticipate potential reaction from the employee and plan your response. Where you think it might be helpful, you may wish to discuss your approach with HR beforehand.

The purpose of the discussion is to ensure the employee understands:

- In what way their performance or behaviour is not currently meeting the standard required
- What needs to be consistently achieved
- General expectations of the employee in their role
- The action that will be taken if there is no sustained improvement

Managers should ensure they stick to the facts, without expressing personal opinions and give specific examples.

The informal meeting may uncover personal or domestic issues. The line manager should give consideration to what temporary support may be given to assist.

For example, acceding to requests for un/paid special leave, flexing working times, increased open door access to line management, time limited adjustments.

It will normally be appropriate, particularly where one-to-one meetings have not provided sufficient guidance, to allow a further opportunity to improve before meeting again to review improvements against expectations. The employee must be given a clear indication of expectations and when the line manager will meet again with them to review progress. It is important for notes to be prepared following the meeting.

The following **Do's and Don'ts** guide may be helpful.

Do's	Don'ts
Stick to the facts	Avoid expressing personal opinions
Be specific	Avoid vague, woolly statements
Ask open questions	Avoid generalisations
Listen actively to what the employee says and how they say it	Interrupt/be seen to be wanting to make your own point
Adopt an open approach	Be accusing in tone
Use positive words such as "improvement" and "achievement"	Avoid negative words such as "failure" or "weakness"
Make sure the focus is on future achievement	Try to avoid over-emphasis on the past performance
Do say	Don't say
There are three mistakes in this piece of work. There have been 6 student complaints	You're always making mistakes
I noticed at last week's meeting that you shouted at Jim when he ...	You tend to shout at people
You've missed the monthly deadline three times already this term on each occasion by at least three days	You're hopeless and never meet your deadlines
It may be that you don't realise this but sometimes your tone and manner comes across as aggressive. For example xyz	You're very aggressive
It's come to my attention that you haven't completed xyz	You're lazy – I can't ever rely on you to complete a piece of work

What do you think you could do to improve your working relationships with your colleagues	You have a poor attitude towards the rest of the team
You have had xx Fridays off sick in the last 3 months	You're always off sick on a Friday

Holding an informal meeting

- Advise the employee you want to support them but at the same time state clearly the nature of the concern and explain why it is a problem. For example the consequences for the University when a mistake is made or a deadline missed
- Give specific examples of instances where performance or behaviour has fallen below the required standard, eg repeated short term absences, or tasks not completed in time or to the required quality
- Listen and consider the employee's response and explanation
- Invite the employee to let you know of any mitigating factors, including any training needs or personal difficulties
- Re-state what is expected in terms of duties, targets etc. Don't assume the employee knows everything that is expected
- If appropriate, ask the employee what they believe they can do to achieve improvement
- Identify learning and development needs and consider how these could be met
- Schedule a follow up meeting
- Advise the employee that if performance/behaviour doesn't improve, that it may be necessary to move to the formal stage of the appropriate procedure
- Remind the employee of the availability of counselling
- In the case of disability, discuss what adjustments may be reasonable and seek advice from Human Resources
- If there are health concerns which may be impacting on performance or attendance propose a referral to Occupational Health
- **MAKE SURE** any support or training agreed is provided
- **MAKE SURE** that the follow up meeting takes place and next steps advised, ie whether improvement has occurred; the importance of maintaining improvements; or whether a formal process will be implemented.

Keeping Records

Managers must make a note of the discussion. This will provide a record of discussion at the informal stage. The length and format of the notes will depend on the nature of the issue. Notes should be shared with the employee so there is a shared understanding of the discussion and to allow the employee to comment. Notes, in any case, are likely to fall within the Data Protection Act.