

Seven Suggestions for Managing & rewarding performance

The concept of performance can be tricky with academic work but it is possible to discern whether someone is capable of achieving more. It may be unrealistic to set very defined goals for work that is open ended, however you do tend to know if someone is ignoring parts of their job in favour of others, or consistently under-delivering. Discussing and agreeing what a person is aiming to achieve in a given period provides a basis for evaluating their progress. You can then also recognise when someone is doing very well and deserves recognition for their contribution.

1 Be open minded about rewards

There are limited ways of rewarding people with money in the academic environment so it's useful to think about other kinds of rewards that you can offer. How can you demonstrate that you value someone and their contribution? Rewards are more meaningful when they are related to the contribution a particular person has made. Could you send someone to a conference that would provide good exposure for their work? Give them some time out to attend a [development programme](#) that would consolidate and build on their talents? Ask the other person to suggest opportunities they would like and see whether you can go some way to assist with this. You won't have total control over [promotion and progression](#) for your staff but you can support people to progress by opening up opportunities for them to develop their portfolio.

2 Keep track of performance

Keeping track of performance sounds horribly managerial but all it really means is making a note of what you've agreed someone has set out to do and regularly reviewing how it's going. You don't have to be the one who determines what the person is trying to achieve, in many instances it will be far more appropriate for the other person to define this themselves. Some people will need more help than others to articulate what they want to accomplish within a given time frame and you may need to brush up on your [coaching skills](#) to support those who really struggle here. Once you have got a picture of what someone is working towards it helps to meet to discuss how things are going. How frequently to meet depends on the trajectory of the work, the ability and motivation of the person, and your confidence that things are on track. It could be appropriate to meet every three months or every week depending on these variables. Your regular discussions can then feed into the [annual staff review](#) process. It's a good idea to keep notes of your meetings summarising any agreements or commitments that were made. The Seven Suggestions for Setting Expectations for Other People offers more ideas on this.

3 Exercise curiosity and compassion

Start with curiosity and ask why someone might be underperforming. Have they lost confidence recently after a rejection or disappointment? Have they become disenchanted with a particular research avenue? Is a current project beset with practical problems? Are pressures of life taking their toll on work outputs? If you can identify a root problem then you can work together to overcome it. Compassion is equally important. If someone is not performing well in their job it is likely that they are suffering in some way. If you can be empathetic enough to understand this suffering and demonstrate a genuine wish to relieve it then you will help this person to move through a difficult time and on to better things.

4 Deal with small things quickly

Is someone perpetually late? Do they always miss meetings? Are they causing problems with their untidy lab bench? We often avoid saying something thinking it will sour relationships. In reality when we don't say anything we get crosser inside and this causes more problems. If you can be courageous, honest and direct you will prevent behaviours becoming endemic and much harder to change. The Seven Suggestions for Difficult Conversations may give you some ideas for how to approach such a conversation if the thought of this fills you with dread. In addition, your [Human Resources Manager](#) (HRM) will be pleased to talk to you and offer a perspective on whether it's a good idea to raise something or not. No matter is too small or silly to ask your HRM about - if it is causing you concern then it's worth mentioning.

5 Raise problems early on

If you have tried to tackle a problem and not seen any change over a period of time then you may need to escalate this to someone else for help. Similarly, issues may arise that you feel out of your depth tackling. In both instances it would be a good idea to have an off-the-record informal conversation with your [HRM](#) to work out what the appropriate next steps should be. Sometimes people avoid doing this fearing that they will initiate an unstoppable formal procedure but it's more likely that you'll avoid formal procedures if you seek advice about the problem early enough.

6 Review performance from the beginning

All new staff are required to complete an [Initial Service Review](#) before their post is confirmed. This is a review about how things have gone in the first 6 or 12 months in post (6 months for grades A-I, 12 for grade J upwards) and provides an opportunity for you to part company elegantly if the person is not up to the job. However you can't just wait until the ISR to spring this news on somebody. You need to have set clear expectations and reviewed these at regular meetings along the way (and kept the notes). ISR is an important aspect of reviewing performance and your [HRM](#) can help you navigate it well. It's not all about safeguarding against poor performance; ISR is best used to set a solid foundation for the future by explaining what success in the role will look like and how the person can work to achieve it.

7 Get help navigating formal procedures

If you have done everything you can to get someone's performance on track and a formal intervention is necessary then get some help straightaway. The procedures and ordinances for dealing with performance problems are many and varied so pick up the phone to your [HRM](#) rather than wading your way through these on your own and worrying about what to do.

"Great things are done by a series of small things brought together." Vincent van Gogh