



## ACTPS Performance Framework

# Tips for a Difficult Performance Discussion: guidance for ACTPS employees

### Difficult performance discussion checklist

Many of us find giving and receiving feedback challenging. This is especially so when we need to give or receive feedback about work, behaviour or actions that are not consistent with what we expect.

Whilst difficult performance discussions can take place during formal cyclical performance reviews, feedback on issues of concern should not be delayed until then. They should be discussed between employees and managers promptly after they occur. Ideally there should not be any surprises presented by employees or managers at cyclical performance reviews.

The checklists below provide guidance for employees and supervisors/managers approaching a difficult performance discussion or preparing to give feedback to a staff member, manager or colleague.

If you are the person raising an issue : Before the discussion

#### Analyse the situation

What are the gaps in their performance? In what ways does their work, behaviour or actions meet/not meet your expectations?

Have you been clear with the employee in the past about your expectations? Do they understand what is expected of them?

#### Identify your objectives for the discussion

Think about your objectives:

- What do you want to achieve?
- What do you want to be different?

#### Plan the discussion

Choose an appropriate time and place. Think about the time and place to hold the discussion. Sometimes it may be preferable to meet outside of normal working hours and/or away from the immediate work area. This would be dependent on the nature of the discussion, the expected sensitivity of the people in question and whether the discussion can be held discretely and confidentially to everyone's satisfaction.

Think about how you will record the discussion – seek agreement from the other party/ties on the appropriate means for recording the discussion and make sure there is a final joint signing off of a record of what took place.

Consider:

- If there is a performance plan already in place and its relevance to the immediate discussion;
- Previous counselling and whether expected outcomes have or have not been met;
- The difference between underperformance and discipline action under the enterprise agreement



## Plan the discussion (cont.)

Make an agenda or plan to help you stay focussed during the discussion:

- What are the key, relevant points that you want to cover?
- What will you say about:
  - » your expectations
  - » what is going well – being specific and using examples
  - » what could be done better or differently – being specific and using examples.

Choose the words you will use carefully:

- avoid emotive language
- use 'I' statements.

Plan how you will ensure it is a two-way discussion by:

- providing opportunities for the other person to contribute
- asking open ended questions at the appropriate time
- regularly checking for understanding and seeking feedback
- engaging the other person in developing a solution or way forward.

Be prepared to change your mind if new information comes to light.

## Manage any nervousness

- Be well prepared:
  - » seek advice
  - » prepare notes
  - » practice/rehearse.
- Build your confidence:
  - » recall strategies that have helped in the past and work out how to use them
  - » create a feeling of confidence by recalling a challenging experience you managed really well – remember how success felt
  - » replace negative self-talk with positive self-talk
  - » visualise the situation and create a positive memory of it
  - » practice/rehearse.
- Acknowledge that it is okay to be nervous:
  - » you are likely to be more aware of your nervousness than the other person is
  - » most people accept some degree of nervousness in challenging situations.

## Seek assistance and support

- Discuss your approach with a mentor, trusted adviser, the HR team or the Employee Assistance Program.

### If issues are being raised about your performance:

Before the discussion:

- You should have time to prepare. If you haven't had this, don't be afraid to find out what the issues are and ask for some more time to think about your response.
- Think about whether you need or want a witness or a nominated employee representative or union delegate or official present – this is your right.
- Refer to *The art of giving, seeking and receiving feedback*, particularly the section on receiving feedback.
- Think about how you will keep calm during the discussion.
- Does breathing deeply help you?
- A sip from a glass of water before you respond to a question?
- Would a smile or some appropriate humour ease the tension?

During the discussion:

Remember to 'step back' if emotions run high. It's ok to be angry, upset or to disagree with what is being said: but if you feel like you might stop being respectful, it's time to take a break.

### If you are raising the issues : During the discussion

#### Provide context for the discussion

- Be upfront about the discussion being difficult or challenging for you.  
*This is a difficult discussion for me to have with you as I need to talk about some concerns I have about your work/performance/behaviour.*
- Acknowledge what is going well and what you appreciate about the other person's contribution.  
*I appreciate the work that you have been doing over the last few months during a really busy time.  
I really value your knowledge and how I can rely on you to help me find information.  
Overall I am really pleased with your performance, there are just a few things that I would like to see you do differently.*
- Talk about your reasons/objective for the discussion and ask the other person what they would like from the discussion.  
*What I'd like from this discussion is to make sure we are both clear on what is expected in relation to your performance.  
I'd like us to acknowledge what is going well and work out some strategies for helping you to develop your skills so that you are able to take on all elements of the job quickly.*



## After the discussion

### Follow-up

- Make a note of what was agreed e.g. send yourself an email or make a note in your diary.
- Send an email confirming the outcomes of the discussion.
- Schedule follow-up actions in your diary/calendar.
- Do anything that you said you will do.
- Check in with the other person after they have had some time to reflect on the discussion to confirm that are still happy with the outcome. Make a note of what was agreed e.g. send yourself an email or make a note in your diary.

### Provide feedback

- Observe whether things have changed.
- Provide positive feedback where improvements/changes have been made.
- Have a further discussion if improvements/changes haven't been made (if things don't change, see below).

### If things don't change

- Reiterate the previous discussions and what was agreed.  
*Remember when we talked last month we agreed that ...*  
*My understanding was that you were going to ...*
- Indicate that things haven't changed and ask for reasons.  
*I'm not sure that what we agreed has happened.*  
*I don't think what we agreed has been put in place. Is there a reason why this couldn't happen.*
- Indicate the impact/consequences of continued lack of change or improvement.  
*This is really important to me because ...*  
*This is having an ongoing impact on me as it means that ...*
- Discuss possible solutions to the problem.  
*What could we do about ...?*  
*Is there something we could do differently?*
- Agree on action to be taken and follow up date.  
*So we've agreed that .... And we'll talk again to follow up in two weeks.*
- Indicate your confidence that the change or improvement will occur.  
*I feel confident that this will have a really positive impact.*  
*That will be great. It will really help the team to get the work done more effectively.*
- Seek support confidentially by discussing the situation with another manager, your HR team or the Employee Assistance Program.

## For Everyone concerned: Remaining assertive

Being assertive means being firm and clear about your needs and issues in a respectful and professional way.

Below is a list of responses to possible reactions in a performance discussion:

| Possible reactions   | Options for responding  |
|--|---|
| <p><b>Rationalising</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gives an excuse/justification :                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» I had to do that because ...</li> <li>» I had no choice ...</li> <li>» That's how I am ...</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Don't engage in the excuse unless you are able to say that it isn't correct.</li> <li>Reiterate how the performance or behaviour doesn't meet expectations.<br/><i>I understand your perspective. What I expect is...</i><br/><i>Thanks for filling me in about that. What needs to happen in future is...</i></li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Blame shifting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Blames someone/something else:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» it's not my fault</li> <li>» if X had done their job.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore their point if appropriate and focus on how this can be avoided in future.</li> <li>Acknowledge their concern and then focus on what they can do differently.</li> <li>Just focus on what you expect for the future rather than what has happened in the past.<br/><i>What can we do about this next time so that it doesn't have a negative impact?</i><br/><i>What is in your control that you can do differently next time?</i><br/><i>Thanks for filling me in about that. What needs to happen in future is...</i></li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Score keeping:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>States that it has been acceptable in the past or for others to do this                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» it's never been an issue before</li> <li>» others do this and do not get into trouble.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explore their point if appropriate and then focus on what you would like them to do differently.</li> <li>Explain why it isn't acceptable in this situation.<br/><i>That may have been okay previously. Now that ... has changed we need to...</i><br/><i>That's an issue for me to be aware of. What I expect of you in your role...</i></li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Negotiating:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>bargains for an alternative course of action:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» I don't think it's a big issue</li> <li>» Leave it with me, I'll sort it out.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State why it is an issue and what you would like to see happen.<br/><i>You may not see it as important. It's important to me because ...</i><br/><i>Thanks for being prepared to resolve this. I'd like to talk about the solutions with you and how we can put them in place.</i></li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Subject changing:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoids the issues by bringing up unrelated topics                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» what's happening with ...?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Answer briefly and immediately talk about the issue/your concern.<br/><i>Thanks for letting me know about that. What I'd like to discuss now is...</i><br/><i>We can talk about that later. The focus of this discussion is...</i></li> </ul>  |

| Possible reactions  | Options for responding  |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Apologising:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apologises before the issue can be fully discussed:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» I'm very sorry it won't happen again</li> <li>» No worries I'll fix it.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledge the apology and willingness to address the issue and state that you want to talk about what happens next.<br/><i>Thanks for taking personal responsibility for this. Let's talk about what can be done differently next time.</i><br/><i>I'm pleased you think it is an important issue. Let's work through it now.</i></li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Denying:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disputes what you are saying:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» that's not what happened</li> <li>» that's not right</li> <li>» you're wrong.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ask for their perception of what happened/the issue.</li> <li>Outline your perception using specific examples.</li> <li>Be open to changing your mind if appropriate.</li> <li>If not sure how to respond say you need time to think about what they have said or seek clarification and reschedule the rest of the discussion.<br/><i>What do you think happened?</i><br/><i>My perception/view is that .....</i><br/><i>I need some time to think about that. Let's talk again tomorrow.</i></li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Stonewalling:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refuses to engage           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» whatever ...</li> <li>» I don't really care.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State clearly and firmly that the issue is important and you expect them to listen to you.<br/><i>This is a really important issue because ..... Is there a reason why you don't care?</i><br/><i>I think it is important that we talk about this now.</i><br/><i>I expect you to take this seriously.</i></li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Emotional:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>crying</li> <li>anger.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledge that they are upset or angry.</li> <li>Suggest that you have a break/talk later and reschedule another time (soon).</li> <li>Don't allow their emotion to stop you from providing feedback – if necessary acknowledge they are upset, angry but you need to talk with them and press on.<br/><i>I can see you are upset/angry about this.</i><br/><i>Why don't we have a break and talk this afternoon.</i><br/><i>I understand you are upset but its important that I talk with you about this now.</i></li> <li>Seek advice before the next discussion (e.g. from the Employee Assistance Program, HR or a trusted advisor)</li> </ul> |