

Navigating the Performance Management Process with Confidence and Care

Performance management can feel uncomfortable for both you and your employee. But when done well, it protects psychological safety, strengthens accountability and improves team performance.



Handled poorly, it can escalate into conflict, disengagement or turnover. Handled well, it becomes a growth conversation. Here's how to approach it in a clear, fair and respectful way.

Start with clarity, not assumptions

Before initiating any formal process, ask yourself:

- Have expectations been clearly communicated?
- Has the employee had the tools, training and support to meet them?
- Is this a skills gap, a behaviour issue, a wellbeing concern or something else?

Performance issues are often symptoms, not causes. Clarify the “what” before jumping to the “why”.

- It can also be helpful to identify the type of issue you may be dealing with:
- Capability or skills gap may require training, coaching, clearer expectations or time to improve.
- Conduct or behavioural concern may involve policy breaches and require a more formal response.
- Wellbeing or health impacts may require support, adjustments or referral to available supports such as EAP.
- Role design or system issues such as workload, unclear priorities, or resourcing challenges.

Understanding the root cause helps ensure the response is fair, effective and supportive.

Address issues early

Avoiding the conversation rarely improves performance. Early, informal feedback can prevent escalation. Use simple, specific language such as:

“I’ve noticed deadlines haven’t been met over the past three weeks.”

“Client communication has been inconsistent.”

Keep it factual, focused and respectful. Performance conversations can still be challenging, but when they are reasonable management action carried out in a reasonable way, they are a legitimate and important part of leadership.

Separate the person from the performance

Performance management is about behaviours and outcomes, not personal worth. Instead of talking about an employee’s lack of commitment, try:

“The agreed targets haven’t been met, and we need to understand what’s getting in the way.”

This reduces defensiveness and keeps the discussion constructive.

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Create psychological safety

Employees perform better when they feel safe to speak honestly. Ask genuine questions about what's impacting their ability to meet expectations and what support might help. There may be workload pressures, role clarity issues, skill gaps, team dynamics or personal stressors influencing performance.

Early wellbeing support, including EAP counselling, can be helpful when personal or mental health factors are contributing.

Be clear about expectations and consequences

- Kindness without clarity creates confusion. After your discussion, document:
- SMART goals (specific, measurable and time-bound)
- Evidence or examples supporting the feedback (dates, outputs, behaviours)
- Review timeframes such as weekly check-ins or midpoint reviews
- Support provided (training, mentoring, workload reprioritisation)
- Next steps if improvement does not occur

Clear documentation protects both the employee and the organisation.

Stay consistent and fair

Apply the same standards across the team. Inconsistency undermines trust and increases risk. Follow your organisation's policies and ensure documentation remains objective and accurate.

For formal meetings, employees should also be reminded they can bring a support person, and that confidentiality applies, with information shared on a need-to-know basis.

Regulate yourself

Performance conversations can trigger frustration, anxiety or avoidance. Before the meeting:

- Prepare your examples
- Consider your tone
- Focus on outcomes rather than emotions

Your composure helps set the tone for the discussion. If emotions escalate during the conversation, it can be helpful to pause:

“Let's take five minutes and return to the discussion.”

“I want to make sure we handle this well. Let's pause and continue shortly.”

“We can reschedule within the next day or two if needed.”

Managing the emotional temperature helps keep the conversation productive.

When to seek support

If performance issues intersect with mental health concerns, conflict within the team, personal crises or complex behavioural challenges, consider involving HR and reminding employees of available support services such as EAP. Early intervention protects people, performance and culture.

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Referring Staff to EAP Services

- **Manager Support Line:** Call AWS for confidential advice on how to refer employees, manage sensitive situations or talk through concerns.
- **Onsite Support:** Pre-arrange an AWS counsellor to be available on site in the next room so the employee can access support after the news is delivered in the meeting.
- **Wellness Checks:** Provide structured, confidential support for employees identified as potentially struggling. A 15 minute phone session is conducted by an AWS counsellor to identify issues and offer support options.
- **Manager-Initiated Referral:** Formal referrals may be suitable for concerns like conduct, attendance or performance. Set clear goals for counselling, and note that while personal details remain private, you'll receive progress updates. You will receive progress updates and a written report upon completion outlining attendance, engagement, outcomes and recommendations.
- **Encouraging EAP Access:** Employees can call EAP directly—it's entirely their choice. If they ask you to make the call, they must be present to confirm their identity.

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