

Supporting neurodivergent employees through reviews and appraisals

Good practice guidelines for line managers

Although the format of a review or appraisal is set by company policies and procedures there are ways you as a line-manager can make them more effective and less stressful for your neurodivergent staff member. Consider the following:

Frequency

- It may well be easier for your staff member to have these types of meetings more frequently than their colleagues as:
 - ⇒ It will be easier for them to look back at work over a shorter period.
 - ⇒ They will get used to these types of meetings, which can make them less stressful.
 - ⇒ Short term goal setting may be more effective.

Structure

- It will be easier if you use or create a structure for these meetings so your staff member knows exactly what will happen. Using an agenda can help a lot.

Content

- It will help your staff member if you can give them information about what will be discussed in advance of the meeting. Not only will it give them time to prepare what they want to say but could significantly reduce the anxiety they feel about it.

Support:

- Your staff member might appreciate support from a colleague, work buddy or mentor to prepare for a formal meeting of this type.
- Using the agenda and information the staff member can be helped to look back at their work and recognise successes and challenges as well as identifying future goals and development needs.
- They could make notes of discussions to refer to during the meeting.
- The staff member may also need that person to accompany them to the meeting. If so, you should agree their role in advance. They might be needed for confidence but also for communication – to perhaps explain what you mean and prompt the staff member to use the pre-prepared notes.

Your approach (see previous section)

- Be direct and specific – both about the issue and the actions needed from your staff member going forward.
- Use clear plain English and keep sentences short and simple.
- Be supportive and aware of their reaction to criticism.

Paperwork

- Make sure any paperwork given as part of the process can be understood by your staff member. E.g. can it be put in an alternative format e.g. large print; or read by assistive software? Is it free from jargon and ambiguous complex language? Do you need to find out if you can print on non-white paper?
- Supply agendas and briefing papers in advance and ideally comprehensive notes from the meeting afterwards

Good practice in performance management for neurodivergent employees

Good practice guidelines for line managers

Performance management is about getting the best out of every employee. Every conversation between you and your staff member you are managing their performance in some way. Regular open, honest, constructive and professional two-way conversations will bring the best results.

Good performance management will help all staff members to understand.

- What the organisation is trying to achieve and how they can help this
- The skills, qualities and level of performance expected of them.
- How they can develop their performance
- And if they are not performing to the required level – how they can address this.

Please do not assume your neuro-divergent staff member is conscious of the overall organisational aims in their day-to-day work. They may also struggle to reflect on their own performance and what they want and need to develop. Some people may find it difficult to receive feedback and have formal meetings (please see Feedback and Reviews sections for additional guidance) as well as keep accurate records. However, they may approach problems in a different way and be able to suggest alternative solutions and ways of working given the opportunity.

Therefore, the following tips may make the process both easier and more effective for both parties:

If they struggle to understand how they contribute to the organisational and team aims

- Can it be presented visually – e.g. flow diagram?
- Could examples and case studies be used to illustrate this?
- Is there a way they can understand other people roles – e.g. job shadowing?
- Could a workplace buddy or mentor provide guidance?

If they struggle to manage their own performance

- Set clear work goals.
- Be specific and direct.
- Work on shorter term objectives
- Schedule more frequent reviews
- Can they have interim meetings with a more experienced colleague?

If they struggle with self-reflection

- Do they need to spend time with a colleague, workplace buddy or mentor to help them?
- Do you need to create a questionnaire or checklist?
- Can you gather a broader perspective on their work from colleagues in their team?

If they struggle to identify learning and development needs

- Can defined choices be offered?
- Could examples or case studies illustrate the options.

If they struggle with formal meetings

- Can you have more frequent less formal conversations to help them prepare?
- How can you be more visible and approachable?

If they struggle with understanding the process, form-filling and record keeping.

- Can the performance management process be visually presented – e.g. process flow diagram?
- Can paperwork be provided in an alternative format – e.g. audio, large print,
- Can assistive software be used?
- Could templates and examples be provided?
- Who can help them with this?

Make sure you set aside enough time for the conversations and also think about the environment you choose to have them in. Be aware of distractions, sensory issues and privacy.

The first section has been about promoting and maximising performance and this should continue as you recognise and reward good performance. This could be through the pay and reward system as well as training and development opportunities. See the Continuous Professional Development section for ideas on how to help people develop their skills and career.

As a line-manager you will also need to address performance issues. There are some key signs which might indicate performance is dipping or is likely to dip:

- Less engaged with you generally but particularly in one-to-one sessions
- Distancing themselves from colleagues
- Missing deadlines and poor timekeeping
- Unwillingness to go above and beyond.
- Increased absence
- Making mistakes or work dropping below standard
- Customers or colleagues raise concerns.
- Not showing interest in the organisation and its aims

But remember these could also be signs that your staff member needs some additional workplace adjustments so you should find out about this first.

When it is time to address under-performance, it is important to be confident of the organisation's policies and procedures and take advice if needed. Conversations about performance need to be approached in the same way as feedback meetings or reviews – see previous sections. Key things to consider include:

Before

- Plan the meeting so you can give the staff member plenty of notice.
- Be clear with them what the meeting is about.
- Find a suitable private space where you will not be interrupted.
- Allow plenty of time to discuss things fully but also plan for breaks.
- Prepare in advance by collecting together facts and evidence.
- Think carefully about what you know about your staff member and how they might react.
- Check the staff member is able to prepare also – if they need help then a buddy or mentor could help.
- Offer them the opportunity to have support in the meeting if they need it.

During

- Use positive body language.
- Keep calm and objective.
- Stick to the agreed agenda / issues you explained in advance.
- Refer to specific evidence and examples to help them understand the issues.
- Be clear and direct in what you say.
- Ask questions and listen carefully to their views and explanations.

- Be sensitive to their feelings.
- Take a break if you or they need it.
- Agree objectives and be very clear about what is expected.
- Ensure support is in place so they can make the improvements.
- Keep a record of the discussion.

After

- Take some time to reflect on the meeting yourself.
- Ask if the staff member would like to add anything after they also have had time to think.
- Send out notes of the meeting and in particular any agreed actions.
- Arrange a follow up call or meeting to check progress.
- Ask their buddy or mentor to offer some additional support and guidance.
- If the outcome is disciplinary action, then again ensure you follow any company guidelines.

What are the options for developing performance?

Once you have identified what needs to be improved then there are a number of things you can set in place to support including:

Formal training, if appropriate, to close a skill gap. See Training section for what to consider when arranging training.

Shadowing of a good performer

- This does however need to be more than just watching – the person being shadowed will need to take time to explain tasks and decisions.
- To make the most of this opportunity you could set clear structure for it such as exactly what they are observing and if they need to record what they have learnt.

Coaching and mentoring by an experienced colleague

- A coach helps the person to identify their own development needs and solutions.
- A mentor is able to give advice, ideas and guidance in how to address issues.
- It is likely that most neuro-divergent people will benefit from a combination of both.

Temporary reallocation of work

- This could remove some duties to allow time to concentrate on those that need to be performed better.
- Sometimes you may choose to move someone onto a particular project or into a different team to allow them the opportunity / support to improve their work.
- However, this can be unsettling for some neuro-divergent people due to the change involved.

Taken from Medigold's Neurodiversity Toolkit