How to Document Employee Performance

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It happens to every manager: You sit down to prepare a staff member's review and realize you can remember only what the person has done the past few weeks. Or you allow only a single incident (good or bad) to color your assessment.

Supervisors should never rely solely on memory to evaluate employee performance. That makes appraisals far more difficult than necessary. Instead, it's best to institute a simple recording system to document employee performance.

The most useful, easy-to-implement way is to create and maintain a log for each person. Performance logs don't need to be complicated or sophisticated. They can simply be sheets of paper in a folder or a file on your computer. Choose whatever means you're comfortable with.

The key is to establish a system that you will use regularly. No matter how you take notes, make sure to keep them confidential.

Many employee lawsuits can be quickly dismissed if performance logs can clearly demonstrate a history of performance problems leading to the firing.

Recording employees' performance: 8 tips

To begin the process, create a file for each employee you supervise. Include in each file a copy of the employee's job description, job application and resume. Then follow these steps for recording performance:

1. Include positive and negative behaviors. Recording only negative incidents will unfairly bias your evaluation. Make a point to note instances of satisfactory or outstanding performance, too.

One way to ensure a balanced reporting: Update employee performance logs on a regular basis, instead of waiting for a specific incident to occur. Ironically, failing to document a positive performance can strengthen an employee's claims of discrimination. A file of all-bad comments may look like a setup.

2. Date each entry. Details such as time, date and day of the week help identify patterns that may indicate an underlying problem before it becomes more serious.

3. Write observations, not assumptions. In all log entries, be careful about the language you use. Performance logs can end up as evidence in a lawsuit. Your log comments should only focus on behavior that you directly observe. Don't make assumptions about the reasons for the behavior or make judgments about an employee's character. Keep out any comments that border on personal comment or that show personal prejudice.

Avoid emotional content, including personal impressions ("I think ..."), labels ("He's a whiner ...") and adjectives ("very unproductive ...").

4. Be specific. Example of poor documentation: "Employee was late three times in the past month." *Better:* "Employee was 30 minutes late on Feb. 5; reason given: traffic. Employee was 45 minutes late on Feb. 9; reason given: overslept. Employee was an hour late on Feb. 23; reason given: car problems."

5. Keep out biased language. A good rule of thumb: Any statement that would be inappropriate in conversation is also inappropriate in an employee log. That includes references to an employee's age, sex, race, disability, marital status, religion or sexual orientation. Don't suggest reasons for employee actions or make connections between events without direct evidence.

For example, you may know that Dan's wife recently filed for divorce, but don't suggest in the log that his personal problems are the reason his work performance has slipped.

6. Be brief, but complete. Log entries should use specific examples, rather than general comments. Instead of saying, "Megan's work was excellent," say "Megan has reduced the number of data entry errors to fewer than one per 450 records."

7. Track trends. If you begin to see patterns, make notes in the log or flag prior incidents of the same behavior. You don't need to discuss every entry with your staff members. Bring your observations to the employees' attention only after you've defined a specific problem.

8. Be consistent. Don't include comments about a behavior in one person's performance log if you ignore the same behavior in other employees. When in doubt, check to see how similar problems have been documented in the past.

Performance Logs: What to Include and What to Leave Out

<u>INCLUDE:</u>

- Project assignments and deadlines met or not met.
- Your assessment of the quality of an employee's work. Cite attempts you make to help the employee improve.
- Instances of tardiness, work absences or extended breaks.
- Disciplinary discussions and actions taken.
- Employee responses to problems and questions.
- Positive contributions to the work effort.
- Details of significant personal interactions with the employee.

<u>DON'T INCLUDE:</u>

- Rumors or speculation about the employee's personal life.
- Theories about why the employee behaves a certain way.
- Information about the employee's family, ethnic background, beliefs or medical history.
- Your opinions about the employee's career prospects.
- Unsubstantiated complaints against the employee.