

Tips for documenting employee performance

Think your memory is good enough or your team small enough to not bother documenting employee performance? Reconsider immediately. Time has a way of making details harder to recall. Whether at a huge corporation or a small business, smart managers know that detailed documentation trumps reliance on their own recollections.

In addition to eliminating the pressure of mentally keeping track of who did what, how conversations went, and what actions were decided upon, documenting employee performance serves as a record that can be viewed by third parties as necessary. Such documents prove exceptionally valuable in justifying decisions, such as showing a higher-up what led you to promote one employee over another. Documentation also demonstrates attentiveness to established disciplinary procedures, which greatly strengthens a company's defense in wrongful termination cases.

How should employee performance — negative or positive — be documented? Consider these best practices.

Performance issues

When workers exhibit poor performance or unacceptable employee behavior, managers want to address the problem sooner rather than later. Making the person aware of the situation and developing an action plan sets the stage for rectification.

While egregious acts such as theft or physically threatening co-workers usually call for immediate dismissal, companies handle most employee performance issues through progressive disciplinary action. This type of notification system provides various levels of warnings that increase in severity if the employee does not change his ways. Organizations typically provide an outline of their disciplinary procedures in the employee handbook so that workers know what to expect.

Managers should keep a written record of each step as proof of what transpired. Even in the case of verbal warnings — which are often the first course of action — write down the date of issuance and the reason for the warning (such as tardiness). Have the employee sign to acknowledge the conversation. Depending on company policies, this documentation may not need to go into the worker's personnel file. Rather, you might just keep it in your own records unless performance problems escalate.

Beyond verbal warnings, companies frequently require that managers document performance issues through write-ups. Sticking to a template provided by human resources ensures an employee's manager collects and records vital information in a thorough, organized manner.

Write-up forms vary by workplace, but common components include:

- The name and position of the employee.
- The name and title of the person writing the warning.

- The date of the write-up.
- The offense.
- The policy violation, often with a copy of what is stated in the employee handbook.
- A summary of prior action taken regarding this issue, such as verbal warnings.
- A statement letting the employee know where this write-up will be filed and who within the company will be receiving a copy.
- Space for the employee to comment or present his side of the story. (Offering this opportunity is good for maintaining positive employee relations.)
- Space for relevant signatures, such as employee, manager, HR professional, and union representative.

Written warnings often include action plans. These statements present the employer's expectations and how to meet them. Giving an offender as clear a route as possible on how to improve makes the disciplinary process productive rather than simply punitive. People feel encouraged to change. Create goals with measurable outcomes, and state that you expect the individual to meet those objectives. Set a timeline for reevaluation of the situation, such as meeting in 30 days to see if the individual's sales figures have improved. Document any assistance you or the company offer in support of meeting goals, such as training or mentoring.

Written warnings also usually come with possible repercussions for failure to alter behavior. Probation, suspension, demotion, and termination are actions that could come next. Spell out these future actions so that an employee does not feel blindsided if they happen.

Things to keep in mind when creating a write-up



Strive to make performance documentation as accurate as possible. Record your own direct observations, not what others claim. You can mention the fact that a third party (such as a customer or colleague) reported information or lodged a complaint. However, do not treat what others say they saw or what they conclude as your own recollection.

Stick to reporting what happened, and give specific examples. You need to provide the facts, not interpret them. Conduct can speak for itself if you describe it well enough. Instead of saying “John is unprofessional and inconsiderate of other team members,” write “When John was absent last Tuesday, he failed to notify his manager in the timely manner outlined in the employee handbook. Without time to find a substitute, the store was short-staffed much of the morning. Colleagues state that numerous customers complained about the wait time to receive services.”

Keep your language professional, and minimize the use of descriptive adjectives and adverbs (i.e., sloppily, pouty, annoyingly). Don’t label someone as having a bad attitude or a personality disorder – you are not a psychiatrist or life coach.

And while some situations may require more effort and documentation than others, actions taken for similar offenses should be consistent. Resist writing a dictionary for one employee and just a few sentences for another if both have the same work performance problem. Over-documentation of a particular employee can appear punitive or retaliatory in wrongful termination cases. Your write-up should never generate the feeling that you are out to “get” someone.

Employee performance reviews

Documenting negative behavior certainly makes sense. The records provide paths for improvement, lay the foundation for progressive discipline, and many times motivate the offender to change. Managers also benefit, though, from regularly documenting the performance of employees who are not in “trouble.”

Such documentation typically comes once or twice a year in the form of performance appraisals. Like with write-ups, human resources supplies managers with a template to make performance evaluations thorough, consistent, and relevant.

Areas frequently covered in performance evaluations include:

- Quality of work
- Fulfillment of individual job description
- Competency at role-specific tasks
- Industry knowledge
- Attitude
- Professionalism
- Ability to work with others

Judgment may be quantitative in nature, such as assigning a numerical ranking on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). This method allows comparison among employees in similar positions by examining total score or by determining an individual's average (adding the ratings and dividing by the total number of entries).

Some employers choose to use simple descriptions rather than numbers. For instance, the evaluator places a checkmark for each action or behavior in the appropriate column under "excellent," "good," "satisfactory," or "unsatisfactory." Besides specific information, this method creates an overall picture by noting where the majority of checkmarks fall.

Many employee reviews include opportunities for expanded input. This space allows an explanation of ratings, such as citing specific examples of inadequate performance or briefly talking about times the person exceeded expectations. Such information helps the employee know what he is particularly doing right or wrong.

Workers do not always agree with assessments. A section in which they can express their feelings encourages their involvement in the review process and promotes reflection.

The top of an employee review form should list the individual's name and job title, the name and position of the person performing the review, and the date on which the form is filled out. The end of the document should contain a space for all parties to sign and date. These signatures serve as an official acknowledgment that the employee performance review took place.

Things to keep in mind when filling out performance reviews



Many of the same things managers should consider when doing a write-up likewise apply to performance appraisals. For instance, written records again should be as objective as possible. Evaluate what you witness without speculating about the reasons behind the behavior. Suggesting that someone's divorce is to blame for a lack of productivity or that an individual should see a doctor for ADHD medication can come off as intrusive and overstepping your bounds. Let the conduct speak for itself.

Similarly, strive to keep personal feelings out of ratings. Judge what you see regardless of how much you like or dislike someone. Boastful Tom may get on people's nerves, but if his work truly is outstanding, he deserves the highest rating in that category. Perhaps suggest in comments that he could strengthen relations with co-workers by making a point of sharing credit on team projects.

Sensitive to how an employee will take criticism, a manager may try to deliver a message as "nicely" as possible. Sugarcoating with positive language, however, runs the risk of the problem never coming to the worker's attention. Subsequently, you cannot expect the person to change his actions if not given clear notice that a problem exists and guidance on how to rectify it.

Watch, too, that your numbers and statements support each other. Scores and written feedback that do not align leave a worker confused about how well she truly meets company expectations. And since organizations rely on performance evaluations when deciding things like raises and promotions, other readers of these written records need to see a clear picture. If Stella receives a 3 out of 5 for the quality of her work, comments should use words such as "adequate" or "sufficient" rather than "outstanding" or "great."

Finally, remember that a performance appraisal should cover the entire defined period in question, such as six months or a year. Watch falling for the "Santa Claus trap" - employees being on their best behavior right before performance reviews. To combat recency bias, jot regular notes to yourself about employee performance. Keep these in your own files; they do not need to go in an employee's personnel file. Gina's excellent handling of a difficult client back in August may totally escape your mind by annual review time in December. You'll appreciate notes to fall back on.