

Employee Performance Documentation – If you did not write it down...It did not happen ©copyright 2006 by Robert W. Lucas

Why Document?

Documentation of performance coaching is a crucial part of any supervisor's daily life. Without documentation, there is no way of remembering events accurately, proving that conversations ever took place, or providing a "paper trail" for others in your absence. Professional supervisors always objectively document what they do related to coaching activities. This takes any subjectivity out of the mix when writing performance appraisals since you have a chronological record of performance events and conversations that you had with your employees throughout the evaluation period. It also simplifies the performance appraisal process since you can simply transfer information documented throughout the evaluation period to the formal performance appraisal form when it is time to do so. The key is to leave your feelings and opinions out of the documentation since such subjective information can dilute evaluations and, if there is ever a litigious situation in which paperwork is subpoenaed to court, can make you and the organization look unprofessional.

Documentation serves many purposes and provides numerous benefits. Some of those benefits are that it:

- **Provides a chronological record of performance.** Regular entries made throughout the performance period displays a step by step picture of how the employee has performed over a given period of time.
- **Aids in recall of information.** Performance information is often needed, but difficult to recall, especially if you have several employees. Documentation reduces the loss of important examples of the employee's performance.
- **Serves as a reference.** When an employee or supervisor is promoted or transferred to another location, the documentation aids the new supervisor with an objective overview of the employees' performance up to that point.
- **Furnishes specific examples of performance.** These can be used to justify ratings on performance appraisals and in court. By coaching and documenting throughout the performance appraisal period, there should be no surprises at the performance appraisal interview. You simply transfer your coaching comments from the informal file and review overall performance with the employee.
- **Makes your job easier.** By providing a tracking mechanism for employee performance, you have to do less collecting and recollecting of information when you need it.

Sources of Performance Documentation

In addition to documentation of personal observations that supervisors make, data on employee performance is available from a variety of sources. All are valuable in creating a clear picture of the type of worker you have and their capabilities, accomplishments, and areas for improvement.

Sources of performance information include:

- Previous employee performance appraisal forms.
- Other supervisors or employees who have knowledge of the employees work patterns.
- Reports.
- Letters of appreciation and reprimand.
- Certificates of completion and attendance.

- Written performance goals.
- Job descriptions.
- Attendance records.

Establishing a Documentation System

Every supervisor should maintain an informal file on each employee. Such files can serve as a record of coaching sessions and other significant performance events. It can also serve as a memory jogger and a prime source of information in cases of disciplinary action against a poor performer. Whenever a new employee joins your team, you should establish a file on them and begin documenting behavior. Your first entry should be the date that they joined your team and an outline of what was covered in their orientation. By starting on the first day, you begin a routine and do not miss important data. This comes in handy in cases where the employee claims they did not receive certain initial information.

It is important that you inform employees during orientation of your system for tracking performance. Otherwise, they may think you are trying to hide something or "get them." By informing them of the file and readily showing the contents, you build trust and encourage dialogue. It is also a good idea to have employees keep their own performance file. Prior to the performance appraisal, you can compare notes for accuracy.

Documentation Format

There is no one accepted format for performance documentation. Some organizations prescribe the format to be used while others leave it to supervisors to come up with their own. If you fall into the latter category, here is a simple format that I have used as a supervisor:

Take a file folder, two-hole punch the top of both sides and put in a clip. Next put one copy of the Performance Tracking Sheet (Satisfactory) on the left side and one (Areas for Improvement) on the right side. The forms can be as simple as the sample ones below:

PERFORMANCE TRACKING SHEET SATISFACTORY PERFORMANCE

Date	Incident	Feedback Given	Initials
5/1/93	Joined department	Welcomed to the team. Orientation provided. (Outline enclosed in informal file).	

PERFORMANCE TRACKING SHEET AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Date	Incident	Feedback Given	Initials
7/1/93	Twenty minutes late for work.	Discussed need for punctuality; reaffirmed schedule; solicited agreement to improve.	

As the performance period progresses, simply add additional sheets. Any miscellaneous documentation gathered (letters, certificates, or whatever) are simply stored in the folder with a notation made on the appropriate Tracking Sheet.

Documentation Considerations

You should strive to make your documentation as specific and complete as possible. It is better to have too much information when needed, than not enough. Here are some things to think about when recording or filing information in an employees file.

- **Strive for a neat and orderly file.** This sends a message of your professionalism to others who view the file.
- **Record date clearly and concisely.** When you are ready to use the information later, you want to have a graphic picture of the employees' performance.
- **Remain objective.** Use measurable criteria to explain behavior (times, dates, quotes, quantity or quality of achievements). Avoid biases, opinions, or misleading information.
- **Avoid contradictions.** Ensure that you do not have data that contradicts previous entries. This could destroy credibility in court or confuse others reading the file.
- **Stay focused on job performance.** There should be no entries related to the employees' personal life. Nor should there be any opinions as to why the employee performed in a certain manner.
- **Ensure thoroughness.** Make sure that you have all the supporting data or documentation needed to substantiate entries.
- **Date and initial (or sign) all entries.** This provides a chronology of progressive performance and let's others know who made the observations.

Documenting employee performance does take time, however, in the long run it can make you look more professional, reduce headaches at performance appraisal time, and can paint a more equitable picture of employee performance than simply relying on memory.

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