



## Employee management:

performance appraisal tips —  
nurturing staff productivity and retention

by Carolyn Purden

A vital component of the long-term success of your practice is effective employee management. Hiring is a time-consuming process — and staff often keep their eyes open for better opportunities — so you want to ensure that employees are highly motivated and inspired to remain with the practice.

Well-executed performance appraisals can make employees feel valued, useful, and challenged in their jobs.

Performance appraisals provide an excellent opportunity to focus on an employee's performance by highlighting examples of good work, and discussing any areas that may require improvement.

If done properly, an appraisal can be a positive experience, and a useful tool for improving employee productivity and contribution, as well as developing professional skills.

Red-flagging problem areas, and taking action to address them, will help retain key staff, and contribute to their sense of purpose.

### Steps to an effective appraisal

There are several steps in the performance appraisal cycle. The three key steps are:

- Defining job performance.
- Measuring job performance.
- Providing job performance feedback.

In order to define job performance, you will need to develop a job description that is attuned with the practice's goals and objectives. This requires listing key duties and responsibilities, and articulating the most important outcomes and contributions required of the employee.

The job description should also set out reporting relationships, and the necessary qualifications for the position. You can carry out research online to find sample job descriptions, or consult with other physicians or office managers to see whether they have developed job descriptions for similar positions that they would be willing to share.

Once a job description is completed, you will need to measure the employee's performance against it on a regular basis to ensure that expectations on both sides are being met.

There are a variety of factors for you to consider when determining the goals and objectives of the job; the "SMART" concept can provide some guidance in

this regard. SMART — which stands for "specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely" — means that you must be specific in your expectations of the employee, and set measurable, attainable and realistic goals that can be met within an agreed-upon timeframe.

You need to measure the quality of the employee's work, as well as the timeliness of delivery. You must also investigate and follow up any persistent bad behaviours, such as tardiness or absenteeism, which can have a negative impact on the work of other staff members.

If the employee is greeting or meeting with patients, you will want to consider important factors such as the employee's professionalism, telephone manner, and whether he or she demonstrates a client-oriented attitude. You must also ascertain whether or not the policies of the practice are being followed.

There are many ways to provide feedback on employee performance.

As a manager, you can simply deliver an appraisal once or twice annually, but the “top-down” approach does not actively encourage the employee’s participation.

Alternatively, both you and the employee can independently assess the employee’s performance, and then compare the two appraisals. This approach opens the door to a two-way discussion of management and employee expectations. If communication between you and the employee has been consistent during your working relationship, both of you should be in accord.

If physician colleagues are familiar with the employee’s responsibilities, they too can contribute to an appraisal. Or if the employee is a member of a team, all members can collectively appraise each other’s performances. Whichever mode of appraisal you choose, you will want to convey to the employee how his or her performance is affecting the practice, the patient, and/or the staff team. Your approach should be one of trying to help the employee succeed in his or her position.

It is important to provide regularly-scheduled appraisals to remind the employee about the requirements of the position, and management’s expectation that these requirements will be met. Regular appraisals offer an opportunity for the manager to recognize positive steps toward meeting expectations. If, however, the employee is not meeting those expectations, you can attempt to guide him or her back on track by setting interim objectives and timelines. Following up with the employee from that point on is extremely important, and more frequent meetings may be necessary.

Constructive feedback, which alerts the employee to an area in which his or her performance could improve, should be delivered carefully to avoid a defensive response. Be specific, focusing on a particular behaviour rather than talking in generalities. If feedback relates to a specific event, provide it as

close to the event as possible. Speak about actions or behaviour that the employee can change. Be consistent in your message.

Positive feedback tells the employee that he or she is performing well. It should also be timely, closely related to the event, and should specify exactly how the employee met or surpassed expectations. Positive recognition is a powerful motivator — the employee will then want and seek further recognition, resulting in more of the desired performance. Positive feedback encourages the employee to do better, raises self-esteem, and provides motivation.

As a manager, your aim should be for your team of employees to meet the practice’s goals and objectives through

the consistent expected execution of their responsibilities. By developing job descriptions, monitoring employee performance, and providing frequent feedback, you are laying the groundwork for a successful practice. ■

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## Dos and Don'ts of Employee Performance Management

### Do:

- Hold regularly scheduled meetings to review performance.
- Take notes in a meeting with your employee so there is a record of what was discussed. Provide a copy of the notes to the employee.
- Provide feedback in a timely manner.
- Be specific about an employee’s performance, identifying the actions to which you are referring.
- Link employee performance to the practice’s goals and objectives.
- Set interim objectives and timelines if improvements are required, and follow up.
- Be consistent in your feedback.
- Outline the consequences if feedback is ignored.

### Don't:

- Provide feedback only when things are wrong.
- Wait until performance is substantially below expectations before providing feedback.
- Provide feedback in front of other employees.
- Provide feedback through e-mail or telephone messages or notes.
- Attribute feedback to a third party; take responsibility for what you’re saying.
- Beat about the bush; be direct.
- Provide advice unless you ask the employee’s permission to do so.
- Ask why something was done; focus on the behaviour, not the motivation.