

A Checklist: Documentation Best Practices

Use this checklist to help you document performance concerns, expectations, and agreements. Remember that when you capture your observations and concerns – objectively – it will save you time later. Benefits to documentation:

- Aid your (and others') memory
- Provides written notice of expectations and minimizes misunderstandings
- Reveal patterns

You want to identify the reasons for the corrective actions you take. If your decisions are ever challenged or if you are faced with any formal complaints, good documentation will provide a record of the legitimate basis for your actions and decisions.

Stick to the Facts

Be sure to leave emotions, impressions, or personal criticisms out of your documentation. Capture only the specific details of what happened – the facts only. Include both positive and negative information (when applicable). Include information about the employee's perspective, reaction, or response when applicable, especially if they disagree. Do not speculate about what might be motivating performance deficiencies or misconduct (e.g., mental or physical health issues). And finally, document the outcome of each performance counseling discussion.

Write it down

Set up a system for capturing your notes about the feedback and counseling sessions you have regarding performance problems, discipline, or misconduct by the employee as they occur. Create a folder for each employee and a document to track your notes. Summarize any performance counseling discussions in an email that you file. The email should outline what was agreed to so that the expectations are reiterated in writing.

Informal and brief notes help too

Capturing a quick note is an important form of record keeping which doesn't have to take up too much time. And, if the time comes that you need it, the time invested in documenting informal and formal interactions and observations will have been very well spent.

Be honest and constructive in faculty and staff reviews

Any formal written performance review is official documentation and, therefore, very important. If you do not document legitimate concerns in these reviews (including faculty annual reports), it will affect credibility later when you address issues.

Summary

To summarize, managers need to: (1) engage in good communication; (2) address problems as they arise; and (3) document the interaction from both perspectives. Effective documentation can help defend against accusations of unfair treatment and/or retaliation. You want to avoid being in a position in which you begin documenting performance problems only after an employee files a complaint.