

## **Theme booklet for managers**

**The good interview in connection with underperformance**

This booklet is intended for managers who need to conduct an interview with an employee who is not making the necessary efforts in his/her job or who does not comply with the applicable guidelines. The booklet provides inspiration and specific proposals for how you can approach the interview, irrespective of whether it is the first interview with the employee on the topic, or whether it is the first step in a disciplinary process.

The booklet is part of a series, and you may therefore also benefit from reading the introductory folder, which deals in greater detail with preparing for a difficult interview—including practical tips and how to use the log book to note down your observations.

## Introduction

As a manager, you must ensure that your office carries out the work for which it is responsible. If an employee is underperforming (in terms of efforts and/or behaviour), you as a manager have an obligation (and right) to examine more closely what may be the reason for it and discuss the problem with the employee. The earlier you do it, the better. It will give the employee the chance to improve his/her efforts and behaviour before the problem becomes permanent. Before talking to the employee, you should consider whether some of the following points have an impact on the situation:

- External events
- Facilities made available to the employees
- Organization of the work and work processes
- Technical aids (IT)
- Collaboration (opportunities and challenges)
- Competences and/or flexibility of the employee

You should also take into account that all employees are different—in terms of age and education, mentality, stamina, flexibility, decision-making, and competences as well as other work-related or personal matters. But it should be seen in relation to your needs as a manager to be able to organize the work and ensure the smooth functioning of your unit.

Based on your considerations, you must choose how best to establish a clarifying dialogue with the employee. It is important that the interview takes place at an early stage to ensure it is conducted with the aim of positive and constructive development.

You can read more at DTU Inside on guidelines for a disciplinary process, or contact your HR Partner who can also provide you with advice.

If you assess that the unsatisfactory performance or underperformance may be caused by illness or stress, or by the fact that the employee cannot keep up with work due to age, you may also benefit from reading one of the other booklets about 'The good interview' in connection with illnesses, stress symptoms, or senior agreements/retirement.

## Pre-interview preparation

There will always be something at stake for the employee, when you as the manager invite the employee to an interview on underperformance or unsatisfactory performance of tasks. Even if you regard it as a constructive interview aimed at clarifying the cause of the changes in performance and discussing forward-looking initiatives, such as the need for competence development, or other initiatives to bring the employee to the desired level again. Underperformance may also be due to the fact that the employee is not happy in his/her job. It is therefore important that you clarify whether circumstances at the workplace are the reason for the situation.

Interviews about changes in performance, type of collaboration, or competences can be sensitive. Sensitive interviews should be conducted in a

place where you are sure not to be disturbed. When conducting the interview, be sure that you keep an appropriate distance. The interview should be conducted at a conference table—not at your desk. In the introductory folder, you can read more about how best to prepare for the interview.

As preparation for the interview, you can, to advantage, draw up an overview of the topics you want to talk about and carefully consider which examples you want to use in the interview. It could be specific incidents of incorrect handling of tasks, underperformance, inappropriate behaviour, or similar examples. Think about how you can make it as clear as possible to the employee. Your overview should not necessarily be read aloud, but is intended to ensure that you are well prepared and do not get stuck if something unexpected should happen during the interview.

### **During the interview**

Begin the interview by welcoming the employee and being positive. Make sure to maintain eye contact, speak clearly, and explain the reason and purpose of the interview. Ambiguities create anxiety for the employee, who may be expecting something else, for example termination of employment. If it is a matter of an informal reprimand, this must be made clear at the beginning of the interview. See [Guideline on initiatives for avoiding dismissal due to circumstances concerning the employee](#).

#### **Begin, for example, the interview like this:**

“I’m pleased we could meet so quickly. I would like to discuss with you that I’ve noticed that for some time, there has been a change in your performance of tasks. The quality is no longer satisfactory, and there is a need to do something about it.”

#### **Continued...**

“I’ve invited you to this interview, because I want to talk to you about your research efforts. I’m unsure about how far you are in the process of applying for the necessary research funding. I’d like to hear if you have formed any thoughts about this?”

“What I want to talk to you about is your problems working with xxxxx. I’ve heard that you and xxxx repeatedly have been at odds with each other.” (Use specific examples)

“This interview is intended to give us a chance to talk about whether your competences match your tasks, and whether you may need skills development through supplementary training/courses or the like”.

Once you have initiated the interview, allow the employee to briefly make comments and share his/her initial thoughts about the situation, if needed. Otherwise, go directly to sharing your observations.

You need to focus on what you have noticed and what has made the interview necessary now. You must be honest and clear and describe things as you have observed or experienced them to ensure the employee understands the reason for your dissatisfaction or doubt. If the interview is an informal reprimand, you must be very specific and clear when presenting your observations to facilitate follow-up in the further process.

### **Describe what you have observed, e.g.:**

“I’ve noticed that it’s difficult for you to hand in the agreed publications/work on time.”

“I’ve noticed that your evaluation in the course xxxx is not satisfactory/the feedback you receive is not so good.”

“I’ve noticed that you and xxxx disagree academically and are therefore at odds with each other. It has a negative impact on the atmosphere in the entire office.”

“... that you don’t contribute academically to knowledge sharing in the office. That you don’t contribute academically to the community.”

“I’ve noticed that your cases are delayed”.

“I’ve noticed that your colleagues often have to send you a reminder for you to reply.”

“I’ve noticed that you don’t have as many cases as your colleagues.”

“I’ve noticed that there have been mistakes in the cases you’ve had.”

“I’ve noticed that there are often careless mistakes in your handling of cases.”

“I’ve noticed that you find it difficult to maintain an overview of the situation when you are responsible for several projects.”

“I’ve noticed that you find it difficult to maintain an overview of the situation when you are responsible for several cases.”

When you have used various examples to describe what you have observed, end with: “ ... and I am concerned about the performance of your daily tasks.”

Pause for a moment and give the employee time to reflect on what you have said and to reply.

Your role here is to stay calm and maintain a normal tone of voice. Also try to adopt an appreciative and exploratory approach to the interview, so that the employee does not get the impression that you are ‘out to get’ him/her, but rather that you are listening and want the situation to change. Being curious and getting the employee to talk about his/her work situation and how the situation can be changed, or how the cases

### **Ask elaborating questions, e.g.:**

“Can you tell me how you experience your work situation right now?” Is the distribution of tasks appropriate? Should there be an adjustment of tasks? Do the tasks match your interests and competences?

“What could you do to change the situation?”

“How can you set aside time to write more research applications/be the first author of an article?”

“What kind of help would you need?”

“Who might be able to help you?”

“Do you feel that you have the right work tasks?”

“Is there anything we can do to help you finish your work tasks

can be handled differently will make it easier to get an idea of what causes the unsatisfactory performance.

An important element in the interview is that the employee is given the opportunity to give his/her view of the situation. Perhaps the employee is not even aware that he/she does not have the necessary competences or that the performance of tasks is not satisfactory. The employee may therefore be surprised, angry, or upset.

### End of interview

Conclude by summarizing the interview and focusing on the expectations, and what will happen in the future—for example:

- What you expect of the employee
- The most important thing that needs to change in the work process
- How this can be done—prepare, for example, priority lists and offer help to prioritize
- Other agreements
- Agree on when and how to follow up on the interview.

### Finish, for example, the interview like this:

“It’s time to round off the meeting. From now on, I expect you to submit your comments and proposals for corrections within the stipulated deadline, unless we have agreed otherwise.”

“I expect you to make an effort with xxxxx.”

“Please pay special attention to the collaboration with xxx in future, and if you are dissatisfied with xxx, come to me so we can find a solution.”

### Continued...

“It’s been a good and thought-provoking/informative talk. We’ve agreed that you draw up a more detailed plan for how to achieve the targets we have set. I suggest that we meet again in x weeks and talk about your plan and implementation of it.”

“It’s time to round off the meeting. It has been a good and thought-provoking talk. I suggest that each of us think about what is required to resolve the situation to ensure that you can concentrate on solving your cases. Let us meet again next week and discuss the proposals we have come up with.”

If interviews are agreed on a regular basis, make sure to convene them immediately to signal importance/priority.

### After the interview

After the interview, it may be a good idea to write an email with a brief summary. If it is a matter of an informal reprimand, there must be a summary of the interview, and the employee must receive a copy. You can read more about this in the introductory folder. Where appropriate, contact your HR Partner and discuss the interview with him/her. It may be a good idea to use him/her to discuss the content. The earlier the HR partner is involved, the better the advice and guidance you receive during the process.

If the employee does not improve his/her performance as expected, you must take decisive or further disciplinary action—see [Guideline on initiatives for avoiding dismissal due to circumstances concerning the employee](#).