



# Effective Performance Improvement Plan Guide

## Discuss poor performance before starting a PIP

The first step in implementing a PIP is determining whether it is the right solution for the problem at hand. Maybe there have been some changes in the company that directly affect the employee in question and they're still adjusting. Maybe you've had an employee for several years who hasn't been given the training needed to perform a new task and they're struggling. In these cases, a PIP may not be what's needed. Consider a PIP when there have been some consistent problems areas, or a once-great employee has become an underperformer.

If you do implement a PIP, don't let it be a surprise to the employee. No one's going to take kindly to suddenly being put on a PIP when they believed everything was going smoothly. Before even introducing the idea of the plan, you should meet with the employee to discuss instances of poor performance when they arise. Communicating expectations gives the employee a chance to understand that their performance fell short and clarify what's happening on their end. Perhaps they didn't know something wasn't up to standard. If performance is lacking, let them know that there is an issue.

While a PIP can serve as documentation if you eventually need to terminate an employee, a paper trail shouldn't be the sole motivating factor. That's why even with a heads-up, being put on a PIP can still cause the employee to experience negative emotions, reducing morale. How a PIP is handled can help mitigate those feelings. Including a clause in your [Performance Management Policy](#) about the use of PIPs when performance begins to decline can help lessen the resentment an employee might feel after being put on one. Having company policy around the issue serves as a proactive means to let employees know the potential actions that can be taken, as well as reassuring them that the primary goal is to help them improve, not get them out the door.

## Set attainable goals

For a performance improvement plan to be effective, there must be a goal in mind. Something wasn't being achieved by the employee, and now is the time to communicate not only that it needs to

change, but how and when that change will occur. Don't just tell an employee they're on a PIP and that they need to fix the problem by an arbitrary deadline. Even if it's an attainable goal, being non-specific can lead to a lot of confusion and frustration. Guide the employee and help them reach what's expected of them. After all, poor performance in an employee who shows potential and is a good fit is typically an easier problem to solve than replacing them.

To best achieve the goals you establish in the PIP, break them down into steps. What would success look like? What actions do you think might help remedy the situation? When should these goals be met? Big changes take time, commitment, and shared vision. Using an [Employee Goal-Setting Template](#) is a good way to work with the employee to establish outcomes and actions to reach goals over the foreseeable future. Working with the employee on setting achievable goals will help get them engaged in the plan, which will help with their success and show that you want them to and believe they can do it.

Using a [Management Goal Assessment Form](#) can also be of benefit to define, measure, and monitor goals. It also documents previous goals and whether they were achieved or not, which are essential criteria to measure the overall effectiveness of the PIP.

## Check in to review progress

Once you've identified the problem and the potential solution, checking in regularly with the employee is the key to actual achievement. Meetings about performance aren't always the most comfortable, especially when performance has been an issue, but it's worth it to do it properly. This isn't a time to scold an employee, it's a time to check in and review progress by having an open and honest discussion. Come prepared to the meeting by identifying where there have been successes and where there have been challenges in each problem area. The employee should make similar preparations.

Giving this feedback allows the employee to take ownership of their work as well as a chance to share their opinion. Ownership and engagement go hand in hand, in that employees who feel a sense of ownership for their work tend to be more engaged, which improves chances of success. That may lead to a more effective plan. Getting the employee's feedback on how the plan is going

can also help identify where some proposed solutions might not be working as well as they could, and proposing changes that lead to a more effective plan.

Always remember to document each performance meeting and what took place by sending out a [Discussion Follow-Up Letter](#) to the employee.

## Don't hold it against them

Performance improvement plans are just that: plans to improve performance. They document an employee's performance, both positive and negative, and can serve as a tool in multiple ways. That being said, if an employee succeeds at a performance improvement plan and puts their ship back on course, celebrate that achievement. Don't search for new things to justify any negative beliefs you may have once held. If you look for problems, you will find them, but ask yourself whether they're worth it. Exaggerating lingering, insignificant issues will reduce morale and hurt working relationships.

The best advice here is to focus on mindset. Don't fret about whether the employee might relapse into poor performance

someday; be proud they made it through now. The employee has demonstrated that they are tenacious, capable of change, and receptive to feedback. These are all great qualities to have in an employee! Be grateful for them, not resentful.

## Final Thought

In the right circumstances, done with proper communication and feedback, PIPs can effectively bring about change in employee behaviour and performance. Their effectiveness as a tool is greatly dependent on the angle from which you approach them. If approached negatively and without care, the odds of success are lowered. When approached with a positive attitude paired with a collaborative approach, employee performance is far more likely to improve. Slowly but surely, the perspective can be shifted to the positive part of PIPs.

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