



Supervision and Feedback Factsheet

Supervision is the one of the most important practices that an organisation can introduce. Supervision provides the opportunity for managers to meet with their staff on a regular basis to have discussions, provide support and ensure that employees are happy, empowered and have all the tools they need to carry out their role effectively.

This factsheet will examine the purpose and benefits of supervision, and will discuss how to plan and conduct a supervision meeting. Providing appropriate feedback is an essential part of the supervision process and, therefore, it is helpful to understand and explore importance of giving good quality constructive feedback. However, providing feedback is an ability that needs to be developed through experience and training. The factsheet will look at why some managers find feedback difficult and, finally, the four key feedback skills will be discussed.

1. What is supervision?

In this particular context we are talking about supervision as one to one meetings between a line manager and the staff that they manage.

Supervision meetings are a regular and scheduled opportunity to discuss and review progress towards organisational, professional and personal objectives.

During the meeting the manager and employee will review notes from the last meeting, discuss events of the previous period, set interim targets and up-date the on-going development plan. Supervision is also a chance to provide support, and there should also be opportunity to discuss feelings, concerns and employee well-being. The meetings should leave employees feeling motivated, happy and equipped to perform their role effectively.

Supervision should be a two-way process that enables both parties to hold a positive discussion. Most organisations will have a set of standard questions to work through, but there should always be time for open discussion and a chance to address any worries.

Managers often think that just because they interact with their team on a daily basis there is no need for supervision. 'We just discuss issues as and when they arise' is a commonly heard reason for finding regular supervision meetings unnecessary. However, spontaneous conversations should never replace scheduled meetings. Supervision meetings are a regular opportunity for an employee to have their manager's undivided attention in a private setting.

Supervision is one of the most valuable procedures that an organisation can introduce and it has wide-ranging benefits for both the employer and employee.

2. Benefits of supervision for the organisation

Supervision has a number of benefits for the organisation including:

- Helping the employee to understand organisational values and objectives, and how they can contribute to these
- Improving communication between employees and managers
- Providing the opportunity to resolve problems that may otherwise lead to poor performance
- Providing a chance for managers to receive feedback from their staff
- Increasing employee satisfaction and higher morale through regular feedback and, at the same time, improving staff retention
- Ensuring that employees are focused, motivated and clear about what is expected of them
- Lowering rate of sickness, grievance and complaints
- Increasing manager's understanding of the employee's personal and professional employee needs
- Ensuring good practice and policies/procedures are in place and understood
- Setting of action plans plus the chance to allocate new tasks and review present ones
- Providing a chance to monitor work/life balance, including annual leave, sickness, working hours etc
- Identifying and developing staff potential through support, praise, recognition, delegation, advice and guidance
- Building a good working relationship between manager and employee
- Exchanging and updating of information
- Providing the opportunity to review deadlines and workload
- Identifying possible developments for teams and individuals within the organisation

3. Benefits of supervision for the employee

Supervision also has many benefits for the employee including:

- Dedicated time spent with their line manager which will improve communication and openness
- Providing an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate their own progress and development
- Providing a regular chance for concerns to be discussed and problems resolved
- Ensuring there is a dedicated time for discussing personal and professional needs
- Ensuring that the employee receives regular feedback, praise and encouragement which builds confidence

- Ensuring that targets can be set, agreed and reviewed
- Assisting the employee in staying focused and clear on targets
- Providing the time to reflect on role and future career plans
- Ensuring employees have the chance to put forward ideas and suggestions
- Providing a regular chance to receive advice and guidance
- Enabling involvement in decision making and planning
- Reaffirming job description, responsibilities and accountabilities
- Identifying and discussing possible developments for the employee within the organisation
- Identifying learning needs
- Focusing on the employee's well-being

4. Are there any potential problems with supervision?

The many benefits of supervision far out-weigh any potential problems or drawbacks. However, supervision can sometimes lead to difficulties that need to be addressed.

The first potential problem is with time management and the scheduling of meetings. Managers often feel that they simply don't have the time to carry out supervision meetings, especially if they have a large team. They can also feel over-whelmed with the preparation involved.

It has been proven that both manager and employee will get more out of the supervision meetings when they are fully prepared. Planning for supervision meetings will take a significant amount of time, and this is unavoidable. However, managers should see this time as an investment which will result in higher staff morale and productivity, and can also prevent time-consuming problems occurring.

Managers will all find their individual ways of scheduling meetings and planning their time. Many managers find it useful to plan a whole 12-months of supervision meetings at the start of the year, where others may prefer to schedule a month at a time. Most organisations carry out supervision meetings every 4-6 weeks, and others feel that bi-monthly is sufficient. However, it is worth bearing in mind that the less frequent the supervision meetings are, the less efficient they may become.

The other potential problem can be with employees bottling up issues and concerns throughout the month because they feel they have to save any problems for discussion during supervision. Spontaneous conversations should never replace supervision but, at the same time, employees should still feel confident in approaching their manager when the need for unplanned discussion arises. Managers may want to deter employees from constantly approaching with minor issues throughout the day as the interruptions can be very disruptive. However, managers do need to



ensure that employees are able to arrange a time to speak with them as necessary at any point during the month. In some cases a decision may then be made to continue discussions during supervision. In other cases it may be that the matter needs more immediate attention. At no point should employees be made to feel that supervision is their one and only chance to talk to their manager during the month as this will just lead to supervision meetings becoming counterproductive.

5. Preparing for supervision meetings

Both supervisor and supervisee will get the significantly more out of their supervision meetings if they have prepared beforehand. Managers will find that the planning and conducting of meetings will take up an amount of time, and may feel concerned and perhaps frustrated about this.

However, it is important to remember that this time is an investment that contributes to increased morale and productivity, and is also key in the early prevention of problems.

Managers may find it easiest to look over the supervision form and draft some notes and key points for each section of the form. However, as a minimum, managers will find it useful to:

- review the previous supervision notes
- review progress towards targets
- consider possible actions for the coming month
- make a notes of any other issues they wish to discuss

Managers should ensure that their team also understand the importance of preparing for supervision meetings. Employees may also wish to draft responses for each section of the form in advance, or at least spend time considering the past month and thinking ahead to the coming month. It can be a useful suggestion for both manager and employee to keep an on-going list during the month of incidents, events, ideas, queries, concerns and any other issues they may want to discuss during the supervision meeting.

6. Practicalities of the supervision meeting

Another important part of the planning process is considering the length of the meeting and a suitable venue to hold it in.

The length of supervision meetings will vary depending on exactly what needs to be discussed, and is likely to change from month to month. On average between one and two hours should be allowed.

If either manager or employee believes that a longer session may be required then they should raise that in advance to assist with planning. On occasions where time is running short, and there are still issues to discuss,

then a decision should be made as to whether matters can be carried over to the next meeting, or whether a follow-on session needs to be arranged to complete the meeting.

It is important that supervision takes place in a location that is private, quiet and free of distractions or interruptions. Ideally the venue should also be one that is familiar and comfortable.

Ideally supervision meetings should take place once a month to gain maximum benefit from the sessions. The frequency of supervision will vary between organisations but gaps of longer than six to eight weeks between meetings should be avoided if possible.

Supervision meetings should always be held during working hours.

7. Areas for supervision discussion

At the start of the meeting the manager and employee may want to agree in advance what will be discussed, and highlight any urgent matters. The priorities of both manager and employee should be given consideration.

In most cases the meeting will follow the format laid out in the organisation's supervision form. Although it isn't essential to have a supervision form it does help to structure the meeting, ensure that all important areas are covered and also means that the discussion can be easily recorded.

Each organisation will have its own set of questions and format to follow, and this will vary depending on the specific circumstances of the organisation and the job role of the employee. However, generally, the following areas are covered:

- Review of the period since the last supervision meeting – main achievements and challenges
- Review of targets and workload priorities – progress since last meeting
- Any new targets or changing priorities
- Discussion around what the employee would like to achieve by the next meeting
- Whether the employee feels anything further can be done to support them in their work
- A chance to discuss any other issues outside of the targets (including any concerns the employee may have)
- Review of sickness and absence
- Review of any holiday/leave requests
- Training & Development – courses attended since the last session and an up-date on training needs



Although managers and supervisees may choose to use supervision meetings to discuss any areas of concern, supervision meetings should never be a replacement for formal disciplinary and grievance meetings. Where necessary, employees and managers should refer to their disciplinary and grievance policies and follow the appropriate procedure.

8. Recording the Meeting

Every supervision session should be recorded to keep a record of issues discussed and actions agreed. Notes should be accurate and completed promptly. In most cases the meeting notes will be recorded directly onto the supervision form during the supervision session. Where it is decided that notes will be completed after the meeting this should be done within an agreed timescale.

Both the manager and employee should review the notes and sign to confirm that they are an accurate record of the meeting. The discussion, targets, actions and timescales should be referred to between sessions as required, and should be reviewed prior to the next meeting.

The manager should ensure that the completed form is filed securely and treated as confidential.

Supervision records will link in with the annual appraisal and targets. Accurate notes also ensure that there is a written record of any concerns, issues or disagreements.

Finally, recording supervision meetings enables the organisation to audit and benchmark the quality of supervision.

9. Confidentiality

It is important that employees feel able to be open during supervision session and are comfortable in discussing all aspects of their job.

Therefore it is important that staff are clear on exactly what will happen to the information they exchange and discuss during supervision sessions.

The supervision record is confidential and should be accessible to the manager and employee at all times. However, it is important that the employee is aware that supervision records are organisational documents and this means that any discussions recorded are not 'private'. There may be situations where the records need to be accessed including during a disciplinary or grievance, when a complaint has been made or for auditing purposes.

10. Why feedback is important

Humans have an in-built need for feedback and, when deprived of feedback, may become stressed and demotivated. Supervision is about quality one-to-one time between manager and employee, and provides the perfect opportunity to provide feedback.

Feedback should be based on facts, not subjective opinion, and should always be backed up with evidence and examples. Giving good quality, constructive feedback is one of the quickest and easiest ways of improving performance, relationships and motivation.

The aim of feedback should be to help employees understand the impact of their actions and behaviour. Wherever possible, feedback should be used positively to reinforce the good aspects of the employee's behaviour and also to identify opportunities for further positive action. Feedback is an essential element of good performance. Without feedback performance usually deteriorates.

Managers who are skilled in giving feedback:

- establish better working relationships because of their excellent interpersonal skills
- develop the performance of their staff naturally because good quality feedback has a better effect on performance than poor quality feedback
- become more credible as managers and leaders, due to their better relationships and team's performance

11. Why providing feedback can sometimes be difficult

Despite the importance of commenting on employee performance some managers can find providing feedback difficult to do. It is a skill that managers need to develop and practice.

Constructive criticism on poor performance or behaviour is often required and is just as valuable as positive feedback and praise. However, providing this type of feedback can feel uncomfortable and managers can often try and avoid this awkward situation by assuming that the problem:

- will burn itself out, correcting itself in due course
- is not that bad really
- will be made worse if we say anything

This avoidance is a way of taking the 'line of least resistance' against the issue.

In other cases the thought of confronting the employee can also trigger the manager's fight or flight response. This response, which has evolved as a natural reaction against physical threat, is also triggered by an emotional

threat, such as the thought confronting someone to give them critical feedback. It can cause us to psyche ourselves up and be overly harsh, meaning that the employee will probably focus on the 'unfair' way they have been treated rather than listening to the feedback. Or, alternatively, the manager may try to make themselves feel more comfortable by 'watering down' what they want to say. In this case the employee may miss the point altogether or just fail to take the matter seriously.

Although it may seem surprising to many, some managers do also struggle with providing positive feedback. Sometimes managers are even reluctant to give praise assuming that:

- good performance or behaviour is what staff are being paid for so it is just unnecessary to comment, or
- it will weaken the impact of any critical feedback they have to give in the future

Sometimes managers can just simply feel uncomfortable with issuing praise and so avoid doing so.

However, failing to provide praise where praise is due can lead to bigger problems. If good performance and behaviour is not acknowledged and reinforced then it can sometimes tail off. Often this can then cause lower standards to become acceptable for the employee which, in time, can lead to other team members feeling resentful. This can then cause the lower standards to spread to other team members.

The final difficulty with providing feedback can be ensuring the communication is clear. Sometimes, when giving feedback, managers can have a tendency to use vague and subjective terms. For example:

- 'I want a big improvement'
- 'You've got to do better'
- 'I'd like to see more initiative'

Confusing messages can even occur when positive feedback is spoiled by adding implied criticism at the same time. This mixed feedback can be extremely confusing and probably does much more harm than good.

- 'That was quite a good effort, for you'
- Your report covers raises some important points, but I would have used a different font and layout if I was you
- You spoke really clearly during your presentation, and that makes a change

When providing feedback it is important to remember to be precise and objective, and give specific examples where possible. Please refer to Section 12-Feedback Skills below.



12. What does feedback achieve?

All interaction and communication between managers and their employee achieves something.

Whenever managers give people feedback they have an effect on three things:

- the performance and behaviour of the employee
- their credibility as a manager in the eyes of the employee
- their relationship with the staff member

Skilled feedback can have a very positive effect. However, unskilled feedback is likely to have no effect or even a negative one in all three areas. Giving feedback is a skill and it is important that managers receive training on delivering feedback appropriately. The four key feedback skills will be explored in detail below.

13. Feedback Skills

There are many reasons why staff under-perform. Usually helping poor performers to improve and reach the required standard requires supportive action by the manager rather than disciplinary action. There are four key feedback skills that can help a manager provide positive feedback.

Skill 1: Assessing the situation

There are two parts to this skill – being aware that there is a problem and then identifying the cause of the problem.

For example, managers may become aware that they have a performance/behaviour problem when they have an employee who:

- requires constant supervision and is unable to work effectively alone
- carries out work that frequently requires correction or completion
- avoids unpleasant tasks and avoids their fair share of work
- exercises initiative or judgment at a level below that which it is reasonable to expect
- refuses to co-operate
- has an unacceptable attendance, sickness or punctuality record
- causes conflict in their working relationships

Before managers are able to take appropriate action they must identify the correct cause of the performance/behavior problem.

There are four main reasons why staff under-perform:

1. **The employee does not know what you want the manager wants them to achieve.** In this case the employee's performance may have been acceptable in the past but the manager has noticed a deterioration of performance with a new task. The employee may also be checking frequently with the manager, more so than usual.



Communication is key here. It is important to clarify expectations and agree objectives with the employee.

- 2. The employee knows that the manager wants them to achieve, but lacks the competence to achieve it.** This problem can be identified by a lack of ability in one specific area, especially where the task is new and there has been no training provided. It is likely to be the case that performance on other tasks is acceptable.

This is a **learning** problem that can be resolved by providing training. Where training has been provided, but the employee's performance is still below the required standard on one specific task, then this is likely to be a **person/task fit problem**. In this case the manager may want to consider reallocating the task where possible.

- 3. The employees knows what the manager wants them to achieve, and they have the ability to achieve it, but they lack control over other significant factors.** Manager may become aware of this problem because an employee, whose performance is usually acceptable on all tasks, appears to be struggling when introduced to a new piece of work.

If the employee is reliant on other people to help the complete the task then there may be an **interference** problem. In this case it is important that the manager finds out what the problem is and deals with it.

- 4. The employee knows what the manager wants them to achieve, they have the ability and control to achieve it, but do not want to achieve it.** This type of situation could be caused by a number of problems – such as the three listed below.

If the employee usually performs well on other tasks, but seem to be demonstrating a lack of understanding, then the manager needs to check whether the importance of the role or task has been clearly established. This could be another example of a **communication** problem.

Alternatively the employee may hold views, values or beliefs that are conflicting with those necessary for effective performance. This is especially apparent where performance improves under close supervision, but then deteriorates again. This can be classed as an **attitude** problem. If this is the case then the manager needs to spend time discussing the situation with the employee, clearly explain the consequences of under-performance and giving the employee chance to improve.



Finally, if past performance has been acceptable, but there is a sudden deterioration, then the employee may be experiencing **personal** problems which are impacting on their work. In this type of case the manager should talk to the employee about the underlying causes. However, the manager should never try and counsel or offer medical advice. The manager may want to seek HR guidance, or suggest that the employee visits their GP.

Skill 2: Using the right terminology

There are two aspects to this skill - using terminology that creates clear communication and avoiding terminology that irritates people which, in turn, can make it difficult for them to listen to the feedback.

Clear terminology should be specific, descriptive and factual rather than vague, general and subjective. For example, rather than saying 'You've got to do better' it is much clearer to say 'I would like you to achieve the level of output we agreed'.

Managers can often use irritating terminology without realizing it. Often a manager may use words or phrases which they feel strengthen their case and help to get their message across. However, in reality, this terminology actually irritates and makes communication difficult. Examples of irritating phrases include:

- 'The reason I've called you in...' which can make the employee feel they are being called into the Head Teacher's office
- 'What you must do is...' which can, again, make the employee feel like a school pupil
- 'With respect...' which can make an employee feel like they are about to be insulted
- 'I'm being perfectly reasonable...' which implies it is the employee who is being awkward

There are more positive alternatives available which are likely to have a much better effect such as:

- 'Thanks for coming in. There's something I want to discuss. Let me explain...'
- 'What would be the effect if I suggested ...?'
- 'How would you feel if I suggested...?'
- 'If I understand you correctly, what you're saying is... Here's an alternative viewpoint...'

Skill 3: Understanding the structure

It is important to understand the structure of critical and positive feedback. The structures described below have two main benefits. They help managers:

- be specific and objective
- deliver the feedback in a way that is most likely to have the desired effect on the employee's behaviour

Critical feedback

- Remember that the purpose of critical feedback is to modify the other person's behaviour not to vent your emotions
- Describe the behaviour/results you are observing
- Check your observations are correct
- Listen to any mitigating circumstances
- Describe accurately and concisely what you want, including timescales where necessary
- Check that they will do it
- Thank them in advance
- Stay focused on behaviour/results; don't drift into personal comments about the employee as a person

Positive feedback

- Remember the purpose of positive feedback is to encourage more of the same behaviour by reinforcing it
- Describe the behaviour/results you are praising
- Explain how you feel about the behaviour/results
- If relevant, explore what they did to achieve the behaviour/results and discuss in what other situations they might do the same
- Thank them and encourage more of the same

Skill 4: Active listening

When people communicate the process is actually quite complex. Understanding the process makes it easy to appreciate the importance of active listening skills. One person will:

- **transmit**
- choose the medium
- select the words
- complete the 'package' with body language and tone of voice

The other person will:

- **receive**
- decode words and packaging
- combine into a whole message
- relate to already stored information
- file for later retrieval

However, the person listening cannot rely on the person speaking or, 'transmitting', to choose the right words, packaging or medium. Therefore, to help them receive and understand their message, the person listening needs to be involved in the communication process actively rather than passively.

Behaviours we associate with **people who do not listen** include:

- Negative facial expressions
- Being too close or far away
- Facing away from the other person
- Being distracted
- Fidgeting
- Doodling
- Loosing eye contact
- Closing eyes
- Yawning
- Clock watching
- Making 'hurry up' gestures
- Interrupting
- Changing the subject abruptly

Behaviours we associate with **passive listening** include:

- Helpful eye contact
- Looking receptive
- Making encouraging sounds and gestures
- Minimal note taking
- Making relevant comments

Behaviours we associate with **active listening** include:

- Asking relevant questions
- Probing
- Checking understanding
- Summarising

Further guidance for employers on supervision and feedback can be found at:

1. **Acas** – general advice and support - www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=1461
2. **Acas** – Advisory booklet on Front Line Managers - www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=802
3. **GOV.UK** – Information on all aspects of employing people - <https://www.gov.uk/browse/employing-people>

Notes compiled by Clare Cooper with information from the following sources:

1. CIPD
2. Acas

Please note that the information contained within this document is for your guidance only. Professional advice should always be obtained.

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