**HOW TO WRITE A**

**PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN**

**THAT WILL ACTUALLY RESULT IN**

**IMPROVED PERFORMANCE**

**PREPARED BY YOLO COUNTY HUMAN RESOURCES**

As you read through this Performance Improvement Plan process guide, you will find nearly as many references to your responsibilities as the supervisor or manager in this process as there are to the employee’s. There is a very good reason for that. As much as we might tend to think otherwise, the causes of poor performance are not solely attributable to the employee; some are equally the result of the organization’s contributions (or lack of contribution, as the case may be). The following should help you to see why carefully considering the cause of a performance problem is essential to framing a successful attempt to deal with it.

**Employee Causes for Poor Performance**

Lack of Ability Lack of Effort Lack of Attention

Lack of Skill Lack of Basic Knowledge Lack of Judgment

Personal Problems Substance Abuse

**Organizational Contributions to Poor Performance**

Lack of Communication of Performance Expectations

Lack of Timely and Candid Performance Feedback

Failure to Provide Necessary Information, Training, or Instruction

Failure to Provide Necessary Tools, Equipment, and Resources

Failure to Provide Reasonable Accommodation

Harassment, Discrimination, Bullying

All of these causes and more can send an employee on a downward spiral that you as a supervisor or manager will be responsible for addressing, hopefully sooner rather than later. When poor performance is allowed to continue over time the consequence will inevitably be negative impacts on the employee and the organization. Only once you have given thorough consideration to the apparent causes for the substandard performance – and know that there may be underlying causes of which you are unaware at the onset of this process – are you ready to begin crafting an effective Performance Improvement Plan (PIP).

Let’s get one thing straight – there is nothing mysterious, magical, or mystifying about a PIP. At the end of the day, a PIP really just puts into writing the processes that you accomplish every day to get work done efficiently and effectively. It reminds employees of your expectations, advises them of priorities and timelines, makes them aware of how progress to reach a goal will be measured, identifies resources for achieving adequate performance, and, most importantly, demonstrates that both you and they will be held accountable for the employee’s success.

To accomplish all of this the PIP contains several elements. A well-planned PIP will do the following:

* It will explain the deficient performance,
* It will provide specific expectations,
* It will allow reasonable time to resolve deficient performance,
* It will identify how and when progress will be measured,
* It will list resources that will be utilized to assist the employee,
* It will set definite dates for follow-up and feedback, and
* It will confirm the commitments of the employee and the supervisor.

Before we break the plan down into its various parts, let’s discuss a bit about the style or general format you will be using. Consider first the goal of the PIP. You have identified that an employee is under-performing in one or more key areas. Informal coaching has not achieved the desired result of improved performance so you are now choosing to send the message to your employee that immediate improvement is needed and you are doing it in a more formal – read “documented” – way. You are still coaching, although a bit more intensively than before. The goal is to engage the employee in embracing strategies to elevate his or her performance through a clear and concise guided improvement plan. Your tone should be both directive and optimistic. This can be achieved using either a memorandum style document or a pre-formatted document that you can populate with the essential information. Your department may have a preferred style of presentation for a PIP so make sure your document reflects that style.

Plan to have two meetings as part of the PIP process. The first meeting will be to present a draft of the PIP, outlining the performance deficiencies and your suggested plans for how to address them. Because it is important to the success of the PIP for the employee to participate in developing a strategy to address the identified performance issues, the first discussion should be a give and take around possible solutions, timelines for improvement, resources needed, and the metrics that will be used to track successful completion of the PIP. The second, briefer meeting will be when you provide the employee with the completed plan for remediation of the performance problems and affirm the employee’s commitment to improved performance.

Now let’s address the essential elements of an effective PIP.

**ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS**

PART 1:The Notice Statement

At the onset, the employee needs to know the purpose and proposed duration of the PIP.

Ex: *Effective immediately, you are being placed on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), which will remain in place for at least [X] days. During this time you will be expected to make regular and sustained progress on the areas identified in the PIP. The purpose of this PIP is to identify gaps in your performance that are of concern, to reiterate the department’s expectations, and to provide you with an opportunity to demonstrate improved performance and commitment to meeting our expectations.*

PART 2: Areas of Concern

Use bullet points to identify the performance gaps and how the employee’s deficient performance or unacceptable behavior is negatively impacting the delivery of service, the workload of co-workers, or the achievement of program objectives. Impact statements should be concise and, where possible, should use illustrative metrics. Do not try to denote every single area where the employee could improve; identify the priority areas where the employee must improve. Do not overwhelm the employee with so many areas of concern that he or she feels defeated before even starting.

PART 3: Observations and Previous Coaching/Counseling

List the key dates/times you have addressed the areas of concern in the recent/relevant past, including reference to any Memorandum of Counseling or other documents that support the previous efforts made to gain improved performance.

Where you have identified a reason for the inadequate performance, state that reason clearly. Avoid guessing at the reason and be prepared to discuss your conclusion with specific examples if the employee does not agree with your assessment.

PART 4: Improvement Goals/Expectations

Applying the SMART model, list the specific goals that are being set for the employee to address the areas of concern and the metrics that will measure success. Specify as precisely as possible what the employee is expected to do or how the employee is expected to behave in the future. Where there is documentation to support the expected performance – policies, procedures, performance measures, job duty statements – provide them even if they have been provided before. You may even want to have your manager or a co-worker review this section of the PIP (if not all of it) to ensure that your listed expectations mirror the department’s stated expectations.

As you are discussing the PIP, and it should be a discussion and not just a hand-off, be sure to confirm that the employee clearly understands the expectations. Leave no doubt as to what he or she is required to do to be assessed as meeting performance requirements. This is the key area for discussion in any PIP. And it is the area where you can secure the employee’s engagement in the process, which will likely determine whether the PIP is going to be successful or be ignored.

PART 5: Timeline

List the respective dates that the employee is to start each identified goal and the projected date that the employee is expected to reach each goal. This will also help in setting the duration of the PIP. Make sure the employee understands that those dates may as well be set in stone. You can adjust them later where there is a valid reason for doing so. Otherwise, the employee should not be provided wiggle room to deliver excuses as to why a timeline was not met. That in itself is a performance problem.

PART 6: Resources/Tools

Provide information on resources available to the employee to support meeting the improvement goals. Depending upon the nature of the job and the employee’s experience, it may be appropriate to offer assistance in a variety of ways. This may be courses through the Yolo Training Academy or other institutions, online training, books on a particular topic, designating a mentor, scheduling time for the employee to shadow another employee, or designated one-on-one coaching time with a supervisor or manager. Or it may be something as rudimentary as a checklist or a procedure manual. These should be specific resources or tools. Avoid noting something like “We will work to provide you with the tools that you need to complete your tasks” or similarly vague comments. You need to have confirmed specific resources and to be able to name them for the employee. Otherwise, your commitment to the employee is suspect and the employee is left wondering how to he or she is going to be helped to reach the desired performance levels.

PART 7: Progress Checkpoints

Make a schedule of appointments to meet during the PIP to confirm the employee’s progress. And make very sure that you keep those appointments. Expect that you will meet more frequently at the beginning of the PIP, say, weekly for ½ hour, than you will after the first month when you may only meet for ½ hour every other week. If the employee is not making progress, these meetings will serve as your opportunity to discover why and to revisit the PIP to see if it needs adjusting, amendment, or extension.

Do not discontinue the scheduled meetings even when the employee meets expectations. You should continue to meet until the duration of the PIP has been served to assure that the employee can both meet expectations and sustain the improved performance.

PART 8: The Windup

Being placed on a PIP can, and probably will, be a discouraging process for an employee. Remember that a good PIP has equal measure of direction and optimism. End the PIP document with a reinforcing statement that assures the employee that you expect him or her to be successful. This is, after all, coaching and not discipline.

Ex: *This plan is designed to help you to meet or exceed the department’s performance expectations as they have been identified for you above. Your commitment to improving your performance is essential. We are dedicating resources to help you address the areas of your performance that are deficient in the expectation that you can and will succeed. It will be your dedicated effort at improvement that will determine whether or not you are able to meet the performance standards of your position. Ultimately, you are responsible for assuring your success by diligently following this PIP and for communicating with me when you are having difficulty meeting our expectations so that we can work together to eliminate any barriers to your completion of this plan.*

**PLANNING AND PRESENTATION**

The old adage that the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray is never truer than when you are delivering a PIP. You believe that you have prepared a document that captures what the employee is doing wrong and that clearly shows what he or she needs to change to be doing it right. You have put a great deal of thought and effort into coming up with a plan for the employee to prove his or her value to the organization. You may be pleasantly surprised by the employee’s acceptance of responsibility for the poor performance and assurances that he or she will improve. However, prepare to respond to the employee if instead the following occurs:

* The employee contests the facts you have presented to illustrate the unacceptable performance.
* *If you have relied upon established performance standards and used the SMART model to prepare the PIP you will be able to answer this concern.*
* The employee contests the conclusions you have drawn about their behavior.
* *This is where it is essential that you do not speculate as to the causes of or motivations for the employee’s behavior but instead focus on the observable consequences of the poor performance.*
* The employee contests the process and challenges the criteria upon which the expectations have been based.
* *Assure the employee that the process is a fair response to poor performance and that you are giving the employee an opportunity to assist in exposing and overcoming the barriers – internal and/or external – that are impeding the employee’s success.*
* The employee challenges the motive for the PIP.
* *It is important that you make clear to the employee that the PIP is based on performance and not personalities. Don’t allow the conversation to dwell in this area overlong. It is, after all, a bit of a when-did-you-stop-beating-your-wife diversion from the issues of measurable and solvable performance problems. Just bring the conversation back around to the performance issues.*
* The employee alleges favoritism or discrimination.
* *At any time that you are faced with a charge of discrimination, either during or after the discussion of the PIP, provide the employee with a copy of the County’s Administrative Policy “Equal Employment Opportunity and Harassment” and advise the employee that the procedure for pursuing a compliant of discrimination is contained in that document. Then proceed with the presentation of the PIP.*
* The employee says his or her inability to perform at the expected level is due to a disability.
* *Advise the employee that the County is committed to reasonably accommodating a disabled employee and provide him or her with the County’s “Guide to Disability Accommodation”. Assure the employee that you will address those concerns in a separate meeting once the employee has made application for reasonable accommodation with the appropriate medical documentation of the limitations resulting from the disabling condition.*
* The employee claims a health-related problem or admits to substance abuse.
* *As with a disability, there is an interactive process that will need to occur, including submission by the employee of documentation of the health-related problem or history of substance abuse. Continue to outline the performance problems and expectations and close the meeting with a date certain for the employee to provide the documentation to request “temporary modified duty” (not “reasonable accommodation” or “accommodation”) or a leave of absence for medical reasons.*

If you have any questions about the preparation and delivery of a Performance Improvement Plan, please do not hesitate to contact Human Resources at 666-8155.

Note: You may wish to use the following document for your scheduled progress discussions during the PIP period.

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| **PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN DISCUSSION DOCUMENT** |
| Employee Name: | Discussion Date: | Prior Discussion Date(s): |
| What is working well? |
| Improvement Goals/Expectations | Due Date | Progress |
| 1. |  | \_\_\_Achieved\_\_\_In Progress\_\_\_Did not Achieve |
| 2. |  | \_\_\_Achieved\_\_\_In Progress\_\_\_Did not Achieve |
| 3. |  | \_\_\_Achieved\_\_\_In Progress\_\_\_Did not Achieve |
| 4. |  | \_\_\_Achieved\_\_\_In Progress\_\_\_Did not Achieve |
| Summary and Recommendations/Future Actions: | \_\_\_Achieved PIP Objectives\_\_\_Continue PIP as scheduled\_\_\_Extend PIP duration\_\_\_Did not Achieve Required Performance Improvement |
| Employee Comments/Commitments: |
| Supervisor/Manager Signature: | Date: |
| Employee Signature: | Date: |
| Date of Next Discussion (if applicable): |