



How to Manage Staff Performance with Confidence

Managing staff performance is one of the most important (yet often one of the most challenging) parts of leading an early years setting.

You're balancing high expectations, regulatory requirements, and individual personalities, on top of the everyday realities of a busy nursery environment. Add to that the pressure of staffing shortages and increasing demands, and it's easy to see why performance management can sometimes feel uncomfortable - or even overwhelming.

Yet when it's done well, it becomes one of the most powerful tools you have. Strong performance management creates clarity, builds confidence, improves quality of care and ultimately leads to better outcomes for children.

This comprehensive and practical guide will help you approach staff performance with confidence, offering practical strategies you can apply immediately in your setting. Let's dive in.

Start with Clear Expectations

Strong performance always begins with clarity

If expectations are unclear, inconsistent or constantly shifting, even the most capable practitioners will struggle to meet them. It's worth remembering that many performance issues aren't caused by a lack of effort, but by a lack of understanding.

A good place to start is by asking yourself these three questions:

- Does every team member know exactly what's expected of them?
- Are expectations consistent across the setting?
- Are standards clearly linked to the needs of the children?

Of course, in an early years environment, expectations should always align with the EYFS, but they also need to reflect your setting's own values, routines and culture.

Be specific. Instead of saying:

- "We expect good interactions with children"

Clarify what that actually looks like, e.g.:

- Getting down to the child's level
- Using open-ended questions
- Supporting language development through conversation
- Responding to children's interests in the moment

The more clearly you define these expectations, the easier it becomes for staff to meet them and for you to support them.

Create a Culture of Ongoing Feedback

Performance management should never be a once-a-year event

If feedback only happens during formal appraisals, it can feel pressured, uncomfortable and, at times, unfair. Staff shouldn't be surprised by what they hear in a review.

Instead, aim to build a culture where feedback is:

- Regular
- Informal
- Constructive
- Balanced

This doesn't mean constant criticism - in fact, positive feedback is just as important. When team members feel that their efforts are noticed, they are more likely to stay motivated and engaged.

Simple habits make a big difference, e.g.:

- A quick conversation at the end of the day – this is sometimes difficult to maintain in a busy setting, but taking the time to do this will make a big difference to the way your team feels about their progress or what needs to be improved



- Acknowledging something done well in the moment
- Offering a small suggestion for improvement straight away

These small, consistent interactions build trust and make more formal conversations feel natural rather than daunting.

Address Issues Early and Calmly

It's tempting to avoid difficult conversations, especially in a busy setting where time is limited, and relationships matter

However, delaying this type of conversation rarely makes the situation better: small issues can quickly become patterns, and patterns can impact the whole team.

If something isn't quite right, it's important to address it early on.

Approach the conversation with curiosity rather than judgement, e.g.:

- "I noticed circle time felt quite rushed today. How did it feel from your perspective?"

This opens a dialogue rather than creating defensiveness.

Keep the focus on:

- What happened
- Why it matters
- What can be improved

Avoid making it personal – the goal isn't to criticise the individual, but to support better practice.

When handled calmly and professionally, these conversations become part of everyday leadership rather than something to be feared.



Make Appraisals Meaningful

Formal appraisals still have an important role, but they shouldn't be the only time performance is discussed

A good appraisal should:

- Reflect ongoing conversations
- Celebrate achievements
- Identify areas for development
- Set clear, realistic goals

Avoid turning appraisals into a paperwork exercise - they should feel useful and relevant to both you and your team member.

Before the meeting:

- Encourage self-reflection
- Ask staff to consider their strengths and challenges

During the meeting:

- Keep the conversation balanced
- Use examples rather than general statements
- Agree on clear next steps

After the meeting:

- Follow up regularly
- Keep goals visible and active

When appraisals are done well, they provide structure and direction rather than pressure.



Handle Difficult Conversations with Confidence

At some point, every manager will need to have a more challenging conversation – this might relate to performance concerns, behaviour or attitude

These conversations are rarely easy, but avoiding them can affect the whole team and, most importantly, the quality of care for children.

Top preparation tips:

- Be clear about the issue
- Gather specific examples
- Know what outcome you are aiming for

During the conversation:

- Stay calm and professional
- Be clear and direct, without being harsh
- Give the other person time to respond



For example:

- “I’ve noticed that observations haven’t been completed on time over the past two weeks. This is important because it impacts how we support children’s development. Can we talk about what’s getting in the way?”

This keeps the focus on the issue and its impact, rather than making it personal.

End the conversation with clarity, i.e.:

- What needs to change
- What support will be provided
- When progress will be reviewed

Confidence comes from preparation and consistency, not from avoiding discomfort.

Support Development, Not Just Performance

Performance management isn't only about addressing what isn't working. It's also about helping people grow

Every practitioner has strengths and areas for development. Your role is to you're your team build both confidence and capability.

Points for consideration include:

- What does this person do well?
- Where could they improve?
- What support would make the biggest difference?

It's worth bearing in mind that development doesn't always require formal training. It can include:

- Shadowing colleagues
- Sharing good practice
- Short coaching conversations
- Access to relevant courses

When staff feel they are being invested in, they are more likely to stay engaged and committed.



Be Fair and Consistent

Consistency is key to building trust

If expectations or responses vary between team members, it can quickly lead to frustration and disengagement.

Ensure that:

- The same standards apply to everyone
- Feedback is consistent
- Decisions are fair and transparent

This doesn't mean treating everyone the same. People have different learning and personality styles and may need different levels of support. However, the overall approach should feel fair.

When your team sees that you are consistent, they are more likely to respect and respond positively to your leadership.

Recognise and Celebrate Good Practice

In busy settings, it's easy to focus on what needs fixing; however, recognising what's working well is just as important

Celebration doesn't need to be formal or time-consuming, e.g.:

- A simple "that worked really well"
- Sharing good practice in team meetings
- Highlighting achievements in appraisals

Remember, recognition:

- Builds confidence
- Reinforces positive behaviours
- Encourages others to follow

A balanced approach to performance management includes both support and recognition.

Keep the Focus on Children

At the heart of every performance conversation should be the children.

Linking staff performance to outcomes for children helps to:

- Provide purpose
- Reduce defensiveness
- Reinforce shared goals

For example:

- “When we extend children’s language during play, it supports their communication and confidence”

This keeps the conversation grounded in what matters most. It also aligns your team around a common purpose, rather than focusing purely on tasks or targets.

Build Your Own Confidence as a Leader

Managing performance with confidence doesn’t mean having all the answers. It means being clear, consistent and willing to have honest conversations.

Confidence grows over time, through:

- Experience
- Reflection
- Learning from each situation

You may not get every conversation perfect, and that’s fine. What matters is that you:

- Address issues
- Support your team
- Stay focused on improvement

Remember, avoiding performance management doesn’t protect relationships. In fact, it often damages them over time. Clear, respectful communication builds stronger, more professional relationships.



Practical Steps to Get Started

If you are looking to strengthen performance management in your setting, start small:

- Review how expectations are communicated
- Increase the frequency of informal feedback
- Address one issue you may have been avoiding
- Introduce more regular check-ins with your team
- Make time to recognise good practice

Small changes, applied consistently, lead to meaningful improvements.

Final Thoughts

Managing staff performance with confidence isn't about being strict or authoritative. It's about creating clarity, supporting development and maintaining high standards in a way that feels fair and constructive.

In early years, the impact of this goes far beyond the team; it shapes the quality of care, the experiences of children and the overall success of your setting.

By approaching performance management with consistency, clarity and care, you create an environment where both staff and children can thrive.

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