

Background

For many years, employee management has been practised in corporate employment settings as the process for motivating and developing employees, and also as the basis of effective dialogue between employees and managers who invest in professional development and continual improvement. What is known about employee management is that motivated and engaged staff deliver stronger outputs and outcomes in the workplace. Employees who consistently make positive contributions to effective outcomes and engage in ongoing learning are regularly identified as the team members who form positive working relationships and succeed with their own professional development. Understanding and influencing the motivational drivers of an employee is, in human resources terms, one of the intangible tasks of the workplace and of the employee-manager relationship. No single process or system has the same impact when used with different employees.

In workplaces such as early childhood services, employee management is undertaken variably. Some of the often heard views regarding employee management in these settings are that those responsible for employee management, such as the committee of management:

- may not be skilled at conducting the conversations
- have little to offer as reward or motivation, such as bonuses and pay rises
- can be subjective in their feedback or lack credibility and can therefore impact on staff morale.

However successful workplace relationships evolve from effective dialogue that motivates and engages staff, and the educational workplace, such as an early childhood service, is no different to any other workplace in that regard.

Impact on teaching and learning outcomes for children

It is well documented in research that there is a positive relationship between effective employee management and teaching and learning outcomes for children. In his 2003 paper on improving learning outcomes for children, Professor John Hattie stated: “We should focus on the greatest source of variance that can make the difference – the teacher. We need to ensure that this greatest influence is optimised to have powerful and sensationally positive effects, but they must be exceptional effects”. In his book *Visible Learning for teachers*, Professor Hattie

suggests that the greatest influence on “student learning occurs when teachers become the learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers”. In his view, “what teachers do matters” and “teachers’ beliefs and commitments are the greatest influence on student achievement over which we can have some control”. Early childhood services can therefore ensure better outcomes for children and the service as a whole through an employee management process that is focused on and fosters the educator’s learning and development.

Effective employee management processes are multifaceted and should include all the aspects of effective adult learning, including motivation, feedback, the opportunity for employees to contribute to developing their own personal and career-related goals, opportunities to learn from respected peers and to apply professional inputs to their own job. This multifaceted process is described as 70:20:10 by Jennings (2013), who argues that adult learning and professional development comes from a combination of elements: formal learning, peer-to-peer sharing and on-the-job application. The employee management process, if effectively undertaken, fits well into the Jennings (2013) model of adult learning and professional development. Additionally, this model places the employee at the centre of their own development and acknowledges their skills and capabilities for further enhancement and enrichment. Managing the conversation and dialogue around these principles provides a structured framework for the discussion.

Importance of EM&D and effective performance feedback

While employee management is essential in any organisation to motivate and develop employees, it is critical in organisations where there is little attrition or movement of the workforce outside the professional circle. Employees in these jobs frequently have long-term service in a role and can continue to do their job with little change to their abilities and without the need to develop skills to move to another career or organisation for work. Stagnation in such roles is a reality in the absence of intrinsic motivators for professional growth, making it essential for the employer to have a genuine commitment to the employee’s ongoing learning and their professional development.

Professional development through formal learning underpinned by the principles of adult learning should be supported by learning from peers and application to on-the-job experience. Feedback, both formal and informal, should also be a regular element of the professional development experience to achieve enhanced teaching and learning outcomes. Providing no feedback or providing feedback that is poorly delivered and/or received results in a missed opportunity to motivate and engage employees in their own development.

As any employer or manager understands, providing feedback on performance is not an easy task. Frequently, those receiving feedback cite lack of credibility of the person providing the feedback, relevance of the feedback, the inherent subjectivity, timing of the discussion, lack of motivating goals etc. as some difficulties with the feedback process. Inversely, those providing feedback cite lack of motivation on the part of the employee, resistance to receiving feedback and lack of willingness to change as some of the difficulties they encounter in trying to provide feedback to employees. As a consequence, well-meaning but mismanaged discussions between the two parties can occur, which can have a negative effect on the employee's performance. Sytch & DeRue (2010) discuss these themes more thoroughly, suggesting the importance of understanding these pitfalls and providing techniques to avoid negative outcomes. To engage with the employee effectively, they suggest that employers should articulate the purpose and steps for the feedback process, and set realistic goals and development targets, with a focus on professional outcomes for enriched teaching and learning.

Sytch and DeRue (2010) also identify potential pitfalls that managers should be aware of and which require careful attention while providing feedback to employees. Examples include bias, sugar coating unsatisfactory aspects to lessen the impact of the feedback and lack of preparation for the feedback discussion. Acknowledging and understanding these potential pitfalls is critical to the open, two-way dialogue that is essential for the employee management process.

For those providing the feedback, this means:

- addressing one's own subjectivity by focusing on the achievements and abilities of the employee

- acknowledging the likelihood that they may avoid providing feedback about the employee's unsatisfactory performance to avoid unpleasantness and ensure that the employee likes them as an appraiser
- preparing for the discussion by collecting evidence or records that the employee would consider credible to demonstrate their work and use that as the basis for providing feedback where improvement is required.

Key elements of employee management

Employee management is essential to manage and develop employees, and to enhance job satisfaction and employee morale. The key elements of an effective employee management system can be conceptualised in terms of why, how and what: **why** being purpose, **how** being process and **what** being outcomes. These elements should underpin employee development in all workplace settings to ensure it is meaningful.

The implementation of employee management processes can differ from service to service. However, they are likely to be more successful if the process is undertaken with a genuine desire to support and develop employees rather than just as an annual obligation that an employer must fulfil. Baker (2010) emphasises the importance of a two-way process which is ongoing and recorded to document progress, reflecting a factual account of the discussion, and directed toward outcomes and action planning.

What makes an employee management discussion effective?

In a blog published in *HR Daily*, Baker (2010) outlines common practices and key questions for the employee management discussion. Open-ended questions that enable dialogue are considered critical to the effectiveness of the discussion. He offers suggestions such as '*What are some of the areas of development for you in your role?*' as an alternative to the often asked question '*Are you going well in your role?*'

Referring back to plans developed in a previous employee management discussion is also described as essential to establish continuity and consistency of the discussion. This is particularly critical where there have been changes in management (including a Committee of Management) and an employee may be reviewed by someone who is new to their team or organisation. Ensuring that an employee has ample opportunity to listen to feedback, reflect on it and respond also aids the two-way dialogue.

Many authors also discuss the system, process and even the forms used to record the employee management discussion, but Ingui (2012) describes effectiveness as simply being the ability to remain objective, transparent and fair. These factors are critical to ensuring credibility in the feedback discussion, and are also recommended by Sytch and DeRue (2010).

Ingui (2012) describes the process in terms of the outcomes: **achievable, measureable and documented**. These are commonly referred to as SMART goals in many performance feedback systems – **Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-based**. Ingui (2012) discusses the importance of this process as a key method of recording progression and development of employees, planning for the future through goal and objective setting and of providing time to raise concerns and/or achievements.

Employee management and performance appraisal

Ingui (2012) also draws attention to the difference between employee management and performance appraisal, outlining a clear distinction between the terms. He describes performance appraisal as the mechanism for reviewing performance and planning future development, and employee management as an extension of this. He considers employee management as a process for identifying specific areas of improvement and development, and establishing a time frame and method for such development. He stresses the importance of monitoring performance and providing clear feedback, as well as recording progression and development, and places emphasis on future direction and development.

He also indicates the importance of ensuring that both the positive and unsatisfactory elements of an employee's performance are discussed so the employee has a clear understanding of their performance and the performance standards and behaviour expected of them. To focus the discussion, Ingui (2012) hones in on objectivity, suggesting that the best method of achieving objectivity is to ensure that feedback focuses on job performance and workplace objectives and that these objectives are relevant to the role and limited to its scope to ensure that the employee can affect any change required and achieve defined targets. To be achievable, objectives must be measurable by both quantitative and qualitative means. Ingui (2012) qualifies the achievable goals in terms of the level of role held by the employee,

and suggests that the criteria for measuring performance are different for a junior employee compared to a more experienced employee.

Developing an effective employee management culture

Research and recommendations developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (2012) outline processes and purposes, and the value of clearly and efficiently conducting the employee management process. AITSL (2012) focuses on improving teacher quality based on the concept that better appraisal, coaching and feedback, with targeted or focused development, can improve teacher performance and subsequently the quality of teaching and learning outcomes for children.

It is frequently reported that the key elements to effective employee management are often not readily available to teachers or practised effectively. AITSL (2012) identifies a range of elements to ensure that an effective performance development culture can be established in schools and education settings. A performance development culture is not purely about filling in forms, but has as a part of its activity, a range of key formal elements including a focus on:

- student outcomes
- understanding what 'effective' looks like according to professional standards
- the role of leaders guiding the culture of performance enablement
- an acknowledgement of different school requirements in each situation.

Professional workplaces other than school settings identify a cycle of activity as being both formal and informal and, as is identified in all effective feedback cultures, it should be a frequent process, not solely with a once-a-year approach. Ideally, the conversation should be ongoing, and therefore cumulative, to enable employees to demonstrate impact and outcomes by conducting frequent observations and conversations in a regular and timely manner.

AITSL (2012) identifies the issue of evidence and relevance for impact. While educators are in the business of providing effective learning to students, they should also take part in effective learning and development themselves, and even place emphasis on their own learning and development to aid their participation in a learning culture.

In their research presentation, Tayler, Page, Deans, Gilley, Flottman and Young (2009) refer to effective teaching strategies and their impact on learning outcomes, especially with respect to the quality of outcomes for students. They focus on the quality of teaching being a result of the relationship between the individuals involved, i.e. children and their educators. It is implied throughout their discussion that engaged and motivated teachers who invest in their own development and professionalism have a greater chance of providing the quality of teaching necessary for positive relationships. Tayler et al (2009) indicate that the expectations of teachers are higher than ever and therefore the skill levels associated with providing quality learning must evolve to reflect the expectations. This would include engaging in feedback cycles and reviews of professional effectiveness. Tayler et al (2009) argue that a key professional requirement of educators is to give specific and effective feedback to children, as it can expand children's learning, understanding and participation. It is therefore critical that educators undertake this same process to assist in their own development.

As indicated throughout this paper, there are many and varied opinions regarding the processes and practises of performance management. All systems and processes can be critically analysed. All have strengths and weaknesses, however the majority conclude that the quality and frequency of the dialogue i.e. consistent, objective, regular and ongoing, leads to more effective employee management outcomes. Employees who can contribute to their own professional development and can obtain clear and consistent feedback have the opportunity to engage in a more motivated and effective manner in their workplace.

Employers and those who provide feedback to employees and engage in the discussion towards planning for the development of educators have a duty of care to ensure these processes are effective and well-developed. Cole (2012) outlines the process and the phases towards an effective outcome and, as indicated by Jennings (2013), sound practises utilise numerous phases and methods to ensure a robust outcome that can be actioned and monitored. Cole (2012) discusses the taboos surrounding the employee management process which can lead to avoidance of effective practises. He too advocates the learning culture that an effective performance feedback process engenders through ongoing dialogue and evidence of development. Cole (2012) strongly advocates

that the schools where such processes are well established see benefits in teaching and learning outcomes as this culture of learning affects all stakeholders in the learning process. Jensen & Reichl (2011) support the position of Cole (2012), outlining the potential risk of decline in teaching and learning outcomes if teacher effectiveness is not reviewed. They also refer to the process as not simply being a tick-box exercise, and discuss the importance of effective and regular feedback/dialogue that leads to professional development planning and enriched teaching and learning outcomes.

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Literature and further reading

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