**How can performance management support professional learning?**

How often do you find yourself referring back to your appraisal meeting or performance management targets?

Performance management and appraisal should form a key part of any organisation’s professional learning and development, but sometimes annual or biannual meetings can feel quite far removed from the other development processes within the school. The Teacher Development Trust Network works closely with schools to support professional learning and it is not unusual for us to see staff who don’t see performance management as part of CPD. Targets that might be set in a hurry, or feel quite irrelevant to day to day practice can prevent performance management and CPD reinforcing each other. So how can you ensure that performance management processes contribute to and support professional learning?

1. Pupil focus

Research clearly shows that the most effective professional development focuses on specific areas of learning or behaviour, rather than simply aiming to change the way the teacher practices. For example, “improving history essay structure for EAL pupils through targeted use of formative feedback” rather than simply “improving assessment for learning” leads to more focused professional learning which makes it easier for the participant to evaluate and refine their approach. It’s important to try and help teachers and staff see the link between the CPD they’re taking part in and the impact it will have on their pupils.

The same applies to performance management. What might initially appear pupil focussed, such as “80% of pupils must achieve their target grade or above”, or “I must improve my differentiation” does not directly relate to specific pupils and the link is not necessarily clear in terms of who will benefit, what success would look like, and therefore what developmental action to take. Performance management conversations, or even the targets themselves, should not just relate to pupils, but be clearly focussed on specific pupils, with discussion around clear goals and steps to take to reach those goals.

1. Relevance

According to the NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus June 2009 Survey[[1]](#endnote-1), 7% of senior staff reported that CPD was not linked “very much or at all” to their school’s performance management and improvement plan, yet 18% of classroom teachers said the same. It is a common picture for senior staff to feel that performance management is relevant and links into CPD and school plans where their classroom teacher colleagues do not.

Performance management is an excellent opportunity to identify both staff and pupil needs and priorities. It should therefore form a key part of needs analysis for CPD and drive school improvement plans more generally. This should be shared clearly with staff, and staff should understand that performance management is an opportunity to input into the CPD available and to set their CPD priorities for the year. In appraisal conversations it is also important to link any targets with specific development opportunities within school or available externally.

1. Meaningful conversations

A crucial part of appraisal and performance management are the conversations that form the process. It is important that these are purposeful and meaningful, along with a culture of support and trust. The experience of performance management should be developmental, rather than just a means through which you audit your staff. Performance management conversations themselves make up a key part of staff’s CPD.

Some important things to consider are who is line managing whom, and how often they are expected to meet. It is not that uncommon for colleagues to have appraisal meetings with someone who does not fully understand their role or does not have expertise in their subject, particularly for support staff. Line management relationships should be chosen carefully. In order to ensure that appraisal targets are relevant and meaningful, it is useful to regularly refer back to them, adapt them, and have regular developmental conversations.

Through a recent CPD Audit, we have seen that TDT Network member school, Manchester Enterprise Academy, has recently introduced meeting time for fortnightly conversations between staff and their line managers, to ensure that reflective, developmental conversations happen frequently. Regular line management meetings can also make up a key strand of your leadership development within school, or development for support staff who otherwise might have fewer opportunities than teaching staff.

1. Sustained and focussed

Regular developmental conversations around appraisal allow for a sustained and iterative focus on a few key themes. The Teacher Development Trust recently commissioned a review of the international research into what constitutes effective CPD, ‘Developing Great Teaching’. This showed that the most effective professional learning takes place over time and follows a rhythmic, iterative process, where staff can try out, evaluate and refine over time.

It is important that performance management reinforces this approach and focusses on impact on pupils, rather than something that can be met by a one-off input. Regular appraisal conversations would be one way to support this and also allow for a dialogue to evaluate how the school is facilitating professional learning and where any potential barriers to effective professional learning may arise.

1. Ensuring performance management supports innovation

Performance management can easily feel threatening and burdensome, particularly where related to pay. However, effective professional learning takes place when colleagues are free to innovate, take risks, evaluate and learn. These two can occasionally feel in conflict. For example, drop-in observations or book scrutinies can encourage teachers to focus on compliance and ‘playing it safe’, rather than trying out new ideas.

Through our audits of CPD in the Teacher Development Network, we have increasingly seen schools focus on a commitment to professional learning, and a high level of engagement in professional learning. If colleagues can demonstrate that they have engaged fully in a developmental process then that meets an aspect of their appraisal. This removes the risk of colleagues feeling pressure to ‘fix’ an issue quickly, rather than to research, explore and refine approaches that have an impact, even if that includes finding out on the way that some approaches don’t work. One of our TDT Network schools sets deliberately challenging targets for performance management that staff are not necessarily expected to meet, but they are expected to demonstrate what steps they took to attempt to reach that target.

This is important to consider both in terms of target setting, but also in terms of the relationships between direct reports and their line managers. Leadership training should include support around being an effective manager who supports their colleagues to develop and improve their impact on student outcomes.

1. Career development

Performance management should, of course, include aspects of career support. Appraisal is often the route that leadership opportunities or roles are discussed, as well as the ambitions and plans for individuals’ career trajectories. However, performance management is not only about developing your career, it’s also about developing your practice so that you are supported to be increasingly effective in your current role. Whilst clear pathways and career support are invaluable, line managers should also be trained to use coaching conversations and to inspire professional curiosity in their colleagues, encouraging all staff to develop to best meet the needs of their pupils.

1. Teeman D. and Pyle K. (2009), *NFER Teacher Voice Omnibus June 2009 Survey*, NFER.

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