



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

PDR: THE REVIEWEES' GUIDE

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A GUIDE FOR STAFF

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INTRODUCTION

This short booklet is for those staff who have Personal Development Reviews (PDR). Its aim is to explain the thinking behind PDR, to answer the question, *What's in it for you?* and to look at what you need to do to get the most from PDR.

For more support on PDR, speak to your manager or administrator, look at the Learning Institute website or contact bill.dunn@learning.ox.ac.uk.

WHY HAVE PDR?

Nearly all large and medium-sized organisations in the UK have some sort of appraisal. Why? Because it makes a difference. PDR is about being able to sit down at least once a year and discuss the question, “How’s it going?” and then explore the priorities for the coming year, clarifying what is expected of you.

It has been said that PDR is simply what good managers do naturally; they listen to their staff, they find out what’s going right and what’s going wrong, and they try to help keep things going smoothly, whether that’s through helping you to learn something new, finding ways for you to explore a role you’d like to get into, or just saying, “Thank you. Well done.” There is a lot of truth in the idea that many good managers do this naturally. But even good managers forget or keep putting it off under the pressure of work, and not everyone is a good manager. So, having a PDR system helps remind managers to have that important, ‘How’s it going?’ conversation at least once a year in a way that ensures the important things are talked about.

PDR can be useful for you because it gives you time to:

- Discuss your actual work and compare it to your job description. Has anything changed? Does your job description need updating? Are there new ways of doing things that you haven’t been taught or not had the chance to learn? Do you need help with something?
- Discuss how the last year went. What went well? What went less well? What got in the way of you doing the job, and what helped? What could be changed to improve the way you do things?
- Discuss the year ahead. Are there any changes coming that you need to know about, or that mean you might need to learn something new? What will be important to you and the team you work in over the coming year? What are the priorities?
- Talk about you as a person. Do you have any goals? Could your manager help you fulfil these in any way? Perhaps you are simply happy to come to work, do a decent job and then go home, and you feel PDR is therefore not relevant to you? You might not be looking for a ‘career’ or promotion, or any of those things, but it’s still good to be asked, ‘How are things going?’ and to be listened to, and thanked. You might even be looking to retire or to ease down, to work less. PDR is a great place to discuss these goals and find out how best to achieve them. Thinking about retiring, and learning about retirement, is every bit as much ‘development’ as learning about a new way of doing things. And jobs rarely stand still, so you may need some development just to continue doing a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay. If you *are* looking to develop your career, PDR is a key means of

doing this as it helps identify your strengths and weaknesses and can help plan your way forward.

For the University, PDR is important because it helps make sure everyone's able to do what they're supposed to do, and are able to do new things. Nothing stays still. Work changes all the time, so there is always a need to develop in some way. It also makes sure that your job fits into the scheme of things, so that what you do helps your department or college achieve its goals.

Put simply, PDR ensures that important conversations take place about work, about you, and about any areas where you need support or development or where you have good ideas on how to do things better.

What PDR is not

PDR is not about *Discipline*, or about *Grievance* either. They are separate processes. If you have had conversations with your manager about an aspect of your work that isn't going right, then the issue may come up in PDR, but only as a summary of the previous year, and as a way to ensure that whatever was agreed to help you get back on track is working. PDR is not about anyone *telling* anyone anything. It is about discussion. In fact, if the PDR is done well, you will probably do most of the talking.

Nor is PDR the chance for you to save up all your moans and bend your manager's ear with them. PDR is not about anyone venting their feelings about their manager, colleagues, department, or the college tortoise. If anyone has a problem with any of these, it should have been said – constructively – at an earlier discussion, not at PDR. This is one of the key principles of PDR, which we refer to as the 'principle of no surprises'. The principle of no surprises is that *no performance issue discussed at the PDR should be entirely new to either person taking part*. For example, there is little point in a manager telling someone, "Your work six months ago was not up to scratch." at the annual PDR meeting. They should have said it six months ago so that the issue could be discussed and sorted out at the time. And there is equally little point in someone telling their manager, "The way you said to do things at the beginning of the year was wrong. Everyone has been complaining about it for months."

PDRs only happen once you are out of your probationary period. During probation, you should hold probationary reviews with your manager at the mid-point and just before the end of your probation. These will probably be similar in format to PDR reviews, but their focus is on helping you settle in and get up to speed.

PDR is not exactly the same in every department. Each department is able to tailor its approach based on a set of principles agreed by Personnel Committee,

but the differences are often minimal and you would recognise that another department's PDR is very similar to your own department.

What PDR is

PDR is:

- **Personal** – it is about you, your development and your performance against key objectives, and it helps link your needs and goals with the needs and goals of the department and the University;
- **Development** – it is about any development or changes you might need to help you do your job well and to develop your potential, if you want to;
- **Review** – it looks backwards to learn lessons, and then looks forward to the year to come and to any new challenges.

PDR is a constructive review of the past year, and a positive look forward to identify priorities and any development you might need in order to achieve your agreed objectives. Feedback plays an important part, but feedback needs to be done well to be effective. Appendix 5 gives guidance on giving and receiving feedback.

PDR ensures that any aspects of your work that might have gone less well are dealt with openly and honestly, and that you receive constructive feedback and support, together with the recognition and encouragement you deserve when things are going well. It increases your manager's awareness of his or her staff as individuals, and helps staff understand the challenges facing their team, their manager and their work area.

There is therefore something for everyone in PDR, *if they are willing to take the opportunity offered.*

THE PDR PROCESS

Think of PDR as having three steps or stages:

1. Preparation for the annual meeting
2. The annual review meeting
3. Follow-up actions and meetings.

You will find flow charts of each of these stages in the Appendix.

STAGE 1: PREPARATION

Preparation usually starts when your manager receives a reminder from the administrator (or personnel person) that all PDRs must be completed by a certain date (if your department carries out PDR for everyone around the same date) or that your PDR is due (if your department spreads PDRs across the year). This reminder should give you about three weeks before the due date of the review meeting, and often gives more time. Typically, your preparation then consists of:

1. You and your manager agreeing a date, time and duration for the PDR review meeting.
2. Your manager or administrator sending you a copy of your preparation form (often called Form A – see the Appendix for sample forms, but make sure you are familiar with your own department's forms).

They may also send you useful information such as:

- a copy of your Job Description,
- a reminder of your objectives for last year
- a reminder of any goals or objectives your department is keen to achieve.

Your manager or administrator will ask you to complete the preparation form and return it to your manager about a week before the agreed review meeting.

3. Your manager looks at your completed preparation form and may send you their suggested additions or thoughts (or discuss these with you) so that when you get together for the meeting, you both have a good idea of what to cover.

It helps if you have made a few notes during the year against each of your previous objectives about what went well and what didn't go so well to act as a reminder.

STAGE 2: THE REVIEW MEETING

The meeting should be business-like but informal. It should be more like a chat than an interview. It should take place somewhere where you won't be interrupted and where you can discuss your work in confidence. Sitting around the corner of a desk usually works well – as does coffee or tea and biscuits!

Once you have both settled into the meeting room, your manager will probably start off the review meeting with a quick reminder of what you are both there for, the suggested order you will go through things, and how long they think it will take. They might suggest that the record of the meeting (often called Form B) is completed by after the meeting from their notes before they send it to you for signing.

Often, your manager will start by asking you to say how you think the previous year went, workwise, and this will get the discussion moving. Gradually, you may focus on particular headings on Form B (such as 'Any obstacles to achieving last year's objectives?')

The meeting should be flexible, and should be more of a discussion than an 'I think this, you think that' exchange. Your manager will take notes, and you can also make your own notes if you wish, but the main point of the meeting is that you talk, rather than write, so the writing-up may be left until later.

Quite often, the conversation goes back and forth, but your manager should listen more than talk, unless you prefer them to lead – that's up to you. They should encourage you to reach your own conclusions or come up with your own ideas on the best way forward on any topic, but if you seem uncomfortable with this approach they will probably take more of a lead.

Typically, the form that sums up what was covered at the meeting and what was agreed during it, asks for comments under the headings shown below (note, these are one of the things that can vary from department to department but the headings provide a useful structure for any PDR):

1. A summary of your main achievements in relation to your aims, objectives and development plans for the review period (or in the last 12 months) and any significant changes in your responsibilities since the last review.

This is asking you to look back at last year's objectives and say what you think your main achievement was against each (Where did you get to? What stood out for you as successful?)

It also asks you if there has been any significant change in your responsibilities over the last year. Does your job description still describe what you actually do? If not, what has changed and why?

PDR is not the place for re-grading jobs, but if it reveals significant deviation between your job description and the work you actually do, the PDR meeting may prompt a reassessment of your role and grade. In general, however, this part of Form B simply checks to see if any slight amendments are needed to your job description.

If you don't have a job description or objectives, you can list the main parts of your job, as you see them, and comment against these.

2. *A summary of any factors affecting achievement of your aims and objectives or your contribution to the work of the department over the review period.*

This prompt focuses on what might have helped or hindered you in the achievement of your objectives. It might have been that new work, or a change in priorities, meant that some objectives could not be given the time needed, or that some resources were not available. Or, you may have found a way of doing something that is worth sharing and that might help others do the same task.

When it comes to looking at the year to come, you might feel that an objective that was not fully achieved last year is worth carrying forward. You would probably discuss why it didn't get done and make sure the same obstacles didn't get in the way again, if possible.

3. *Major activities, tasks and priorities anticipated in the coming review period and any training or other support that you will need to assist you in achieving them.*

This topic looks ahead to the year to come. Your manager should give their thoughts on what the department or team's priorities are, and how you might contribute to these. Once you know these, you can begin to identify your own priorities and see how these might fit with those of the team as a whole and the department.

This section also prompts you both to think about any training and support that you might need in order to meet new challenges or changed priorities. Bear in mind that the vast majority of development in the workplace is *not* from training courses. Quite often, learning and development takes place as a result of talking to someone, watching them work, or even by trying out something for yourself and then discussing it. Support might take a wide range of forms, from regular meetings with your manager to getting help from someone else, to working alongside another member of your team for a while. Or, it might be that you need a specific resource, such as a piece of equipment

or software. Sometimes, it may be that a training course *is* needed, in which case, try and find a relevant one and then discuss it with your manager.

4. Objectives agreed for the coming review period – these should address all major elements of the reviewee’s responsibilities and areas for development including training opportunities identified.

Once you have decided what your priorities are, and what the key areas of your job are, you can identify objectives that help you focus on your priorities and key areas. What do you think is important to achieve next year against each main area of your work?

In addition to objectives against each of your key areas and priorities, there may be other objectives that are not directly related to parts of your job description. For example, your manager might want two of you to work together to improve something that the team does and then report back on it, or want you to try a different approach to a task and see how it goes. Or, you might agree an objective linked to your aspirations, such as you would like to move into management, or learn a new skill that would make you more valuable in the workplace. Although this objective may not be directly related to your current work, managers are usually receptive to such development objectives, providing they are not overly costly in terms of time or money, and realise that enabling you to develop in this way helps create good working relationships.

By the end of this part of the review, you will probably have 4-6 objectives, depending on the complexity of the job. You may have less, you may have more. Better to have two or three well-written and important objectives than ten rather trivial ones just for the sake of having them. So what is a ‘well-written’ objective?

The key to a well-written objective is to try and make it SMART, which means making it:

Specific – pin down exactly what you want to do and by when, what resources are needed.

Measureable – put in a date and quantities or quality if these can be applied to the task.

Achievable – neither too easy, nor too hard. If you do not believe it can be done, you probably won’t be motivated to try.

Relevant – it should obviously relate to your job or to your development or aspirations

Timely – you should set a time for the achievement. By when should it be done?

Here is an example of an objective that is *not* SMART:

Improve my writing.

As it stands, this objective doesn't say what is wrong with the writing (so how does the person know what 'improve' means?) and it doesn't say by when, or by how much the writing should 'improve'. A SMARTened version of the objective might look like this:

Reduce the number of punctuation errors in my weekly reports to the Steering Committee to not more than two per report by the end of September.

Suddenly, you can see what the problem is, you can see what is meant by 'improve', you know what aspect of 'writing' we are talking about, and you know by when you are going to bring about the improvement.

But how will you bring about this improvement? That's where the next topic comes in

5. *Any actions that may be required within the department/division (or elsewhere) to enable aims and objectives to be achieved, including any additional reasonable adjustments.*

Basically, this asks, "What help do you need in order to achieve your objectives?" The help may be in the form of training, advice and guidance, equipment, or adjustment of the work done or working environment. It is important that you identify any resources or support you need so that you have a good chance of achieving your agreed objectives. For example, if you were thinking of retiring, but wanted to ease out gradually, you might want support in reducing your hours. Or, if you have been asked to use a new piece of equipment, you might need training on the equipment or adjustments made to help you to use it. 'Reasonable adjustments' may be made to the way your work is done or when it is done to enable you to be successful, such as changes in hours or in how you do your job.

As a result of the review meeting, you should know exactly what your priorities are for next year and what you need to achieve to contribute to your team and to the department. You should also have identified any development needs you have. In some departments, any development agreed during the review meeting is listed on *Form C* and this form is sent to personnel or to the administrator to say the PDR meeting has taken place. By listing the development agreed, someone centrally can look at the development needs of the department as a whole and can identify any trends or patterns, or any needs that might be met as a group.

When Form B is complete, you and your manager sign it to say it is a true reflection of the meeting. Your Form B may have a box for your comments. You don't have to fill this in, but there may be something you want to note that you felt has been missed, or you just want to add your own summary statement.

Some departments have a 'grandparent system' by which the completed Form B is looked at by a more senior manager as a way of ensuring consistency of approach or of picking up in any issues that are emerging within the department.

STAGE 3: FOLLOW UP

In many ways, the follow up is the most important part of the PDR as this covers not just getting the paperwork completed and sending it to the right places, but the more important task of achieving the goals and holding regular one-to-ones to discuss progress and any issues arising during the year.

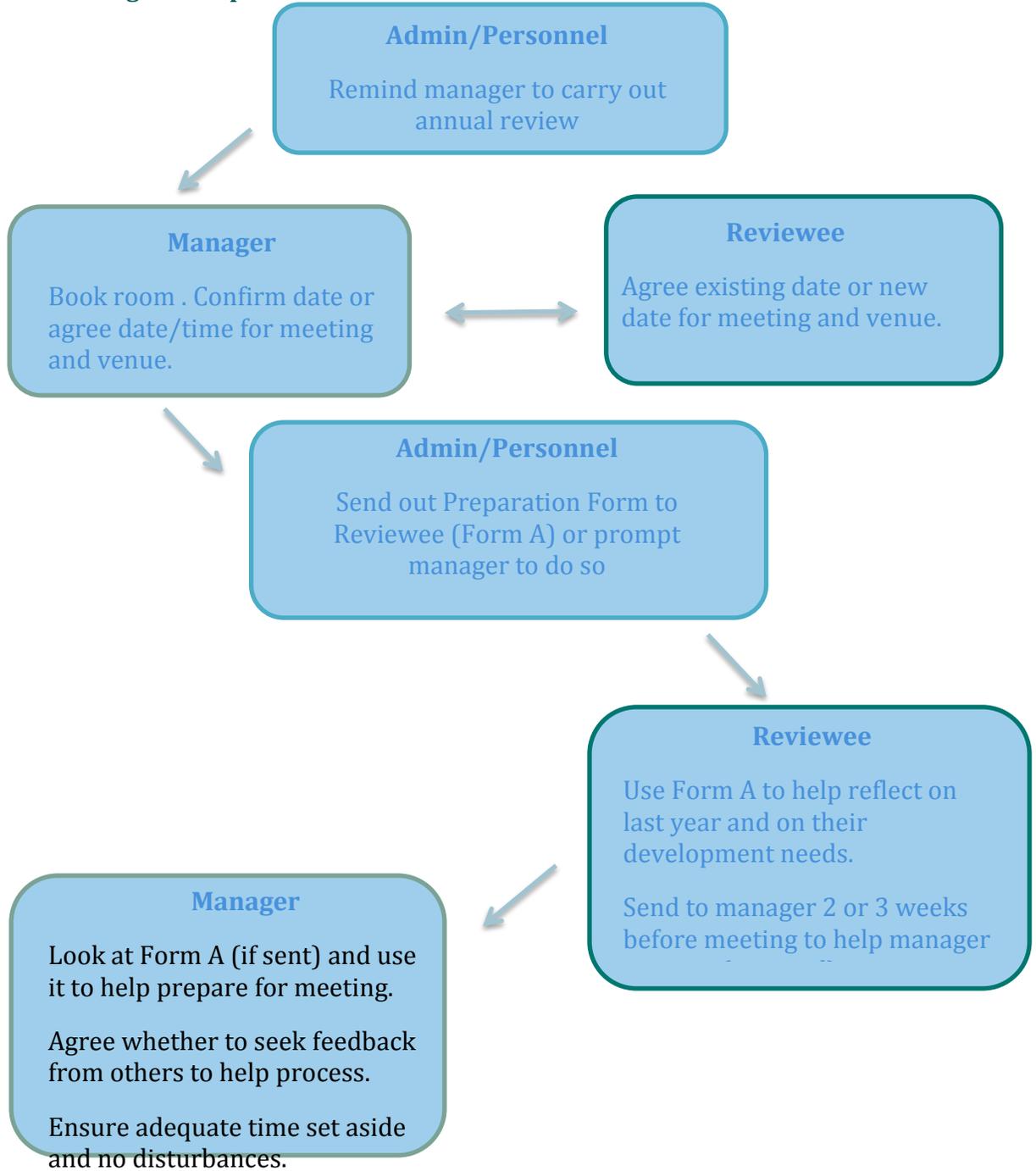
The first task, however, is to ensure that the paperwork is complete and sent to where it needs to be. Typically, departments place a copy of Form B on your Personnel file, so that your manager can access it, and they send you a copy so that you have a reminder of your objectives and of the discussion.

You might find it useful to keep the copy handy on a computer or in a file so that you can jot down notes every now and then against your objectives. You will find this makes preparation for the next PDR a *lot* easier.

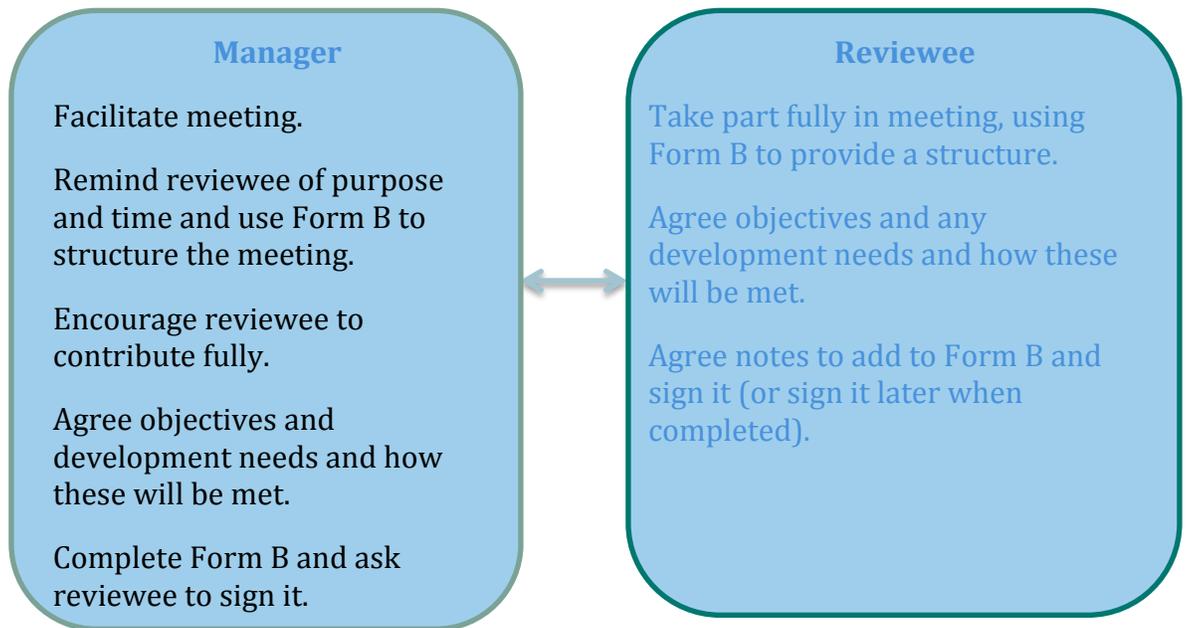
During the year, you should meet with your manager on a regular basis to discuss progress and any support you need, and to check that your agreed development is taking place. How often you do this will depend on your objectives and on the workflow, but should not be less than once every couple of months. These one-to-ones can be quite short and informal, and give you a chance to report back on how things are going and to get advice and guidance if you need it. This is where PDR either goes right, or wrong. Without regular one-to-ones, your manager will not be aware of issues until it is too late and you cannot get the feedback you need. So, always book one-to-ones in advance, and try and stick to the dates.

APPENDIX 1: PROCESS FLOW CHARTS

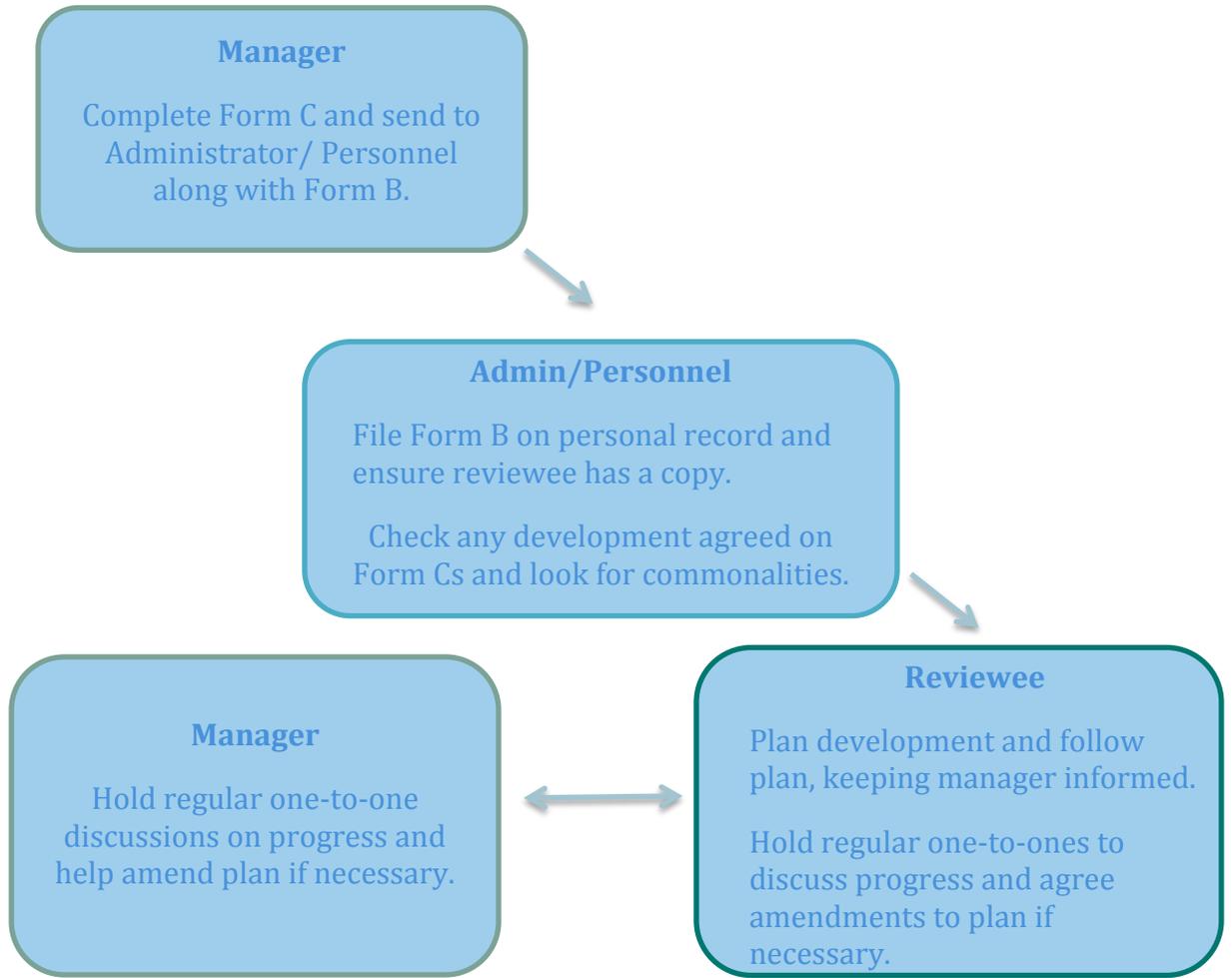
Stage 1: Preparation



Stage 2: The Annual Review Meeting



Stage 3: Follow up



APPENDIX 2:

HINTS AND TIPS

These hints and tips are drawn from people who have carried out PDR for several years.

Preparation

“Some people have difficulty completing Form A. If you’re stuck, ask a colleague or your manager to help. The most important thing is not how much you write, but that you think about last year and think about what you want to achieve in the year ahead. Form A is there to help them you through what you want to say. You might not need to (or be able to) answer every question.”

“Send your completed Form A to your manager before the meeting. It saves time, and means you both know what the meeting will focus on.”

The annual review meeting

“Don’t agree to do your review in reception. My manager did my last one in our reception area. What does that tell you?”

“Funny enough, I don’t like it to be too informal. I know I’m there for work and not just for any old chat. But I also wouldn’t like it to be too formal ... it’s not an interview, is it? My manager is pretty good at getting the right feeling ... relaxed, but also serious.”

“Everyone’s different. Some people like their managers to take more of a lead, whereas some want to go through whatever they’ve put on Form A and kind of lead it. Different things work for different people”

“Leave enough time. Even if you think you don’t have a lot to say, make sure you allow plenty of time just in case it turns out there’s quite a bit to talk about.”

“I had a manager who emailed me a completed Form B and said, “Here’s your PDR. Change anything you don’t like and then sign it and send it back.” What’s the point of that? I said I needed a meeting.”

Follow up

“I try to keep a copy of my objectives handy so I can have a quick look before one-to-ones, otherwise it’s impossible to remember what I agreed ...”

“I always jot down a few notes at one-to-ones. Over the year, you can quite often see a picture ... the story of year if you like. “

APPENDIX 3:

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Who should do most of the talking at the review meeting?

You should. At worst, it should be 50/50. Remember, it is *your* PDR. But, everyone is different, and some people just find it easier if their manager takes the lead.

What if my manager can't meet my expectations with regard to my development?

Then at least you know what can and can't be done. We want to try and help people fulfil their potential and achieve their goals, but there are always limitations. If your manager cannot meet an expectation, ask them to explain why not and to say what they can do. There are always considerations of time, budget and work demands, but the demands of work should not obliterate all else.

What if my job is fairly repetitive, so there's not a lot new to learn, or I don't want promotion, or I was going to retire soon? Is there any point in having a PDR?

Yes. Even if your job is fairly repetitive and there's not a lot you can change, you can still help your manager identify things that could be improved, or at least let them know everything is working pretty well. And even if you don't want promotion, it's still valuable to discuss what goes well and less well in your job, and hear what the priorities will be for the year ahead. And if you're close to retirement, that's quite a development! Your manager might be able to help smooth the way and see if there's any support for you as you approach this milestone.

I've had a few problems at work. Will PDR just be a repetition of 'you need to improve' conversations?

The PDR annual review meeting should not be used as the main place to address performance that is contentious in some way. This should be addressed as and

when it arises. The review meeting can discuss what happened, the progress made and any work still to be done, but it is not the place to raise an issue of poor performance for the first time or to go over exactly the same ground. It's the place to sum up what happened, what was agreed and what else needs to be done, and to identify any further development needed.

What if I work for more than one manager, or what if I am officially managed by one person but spend a lot of time working for someone else?

Generally, the line manager is responsible for ensuring that the PDR annual review meeting takes place, but more than one manager can be involved. If there is more than one line manager, then both should participate, depending on how much of the time is spent with each. Your manager might seek feedback from other managers involved in managing you, or even hold a joint review meeting with your agreement.

Who should decide on the objectives for the next year?

They should be agreed jointly. You should take responsibility for thinking of possible objectives, and then forward these suggestions to your manager in advance of the annual review meeting. Your manager should ensure that you know what the team and department objectives are, and any changes on the horizon that are not confidential, so these can be taken into account. The final set of objectives is then discussed and agreed in the annual meeting.

What if things change during the year and the objectives no longer apply or are no longer quite right?

Agree new or updated objectives.

What if you do not want to participate in PDR?

Some departments make it compulsory, some say it is optional. Check your department's policy. Even if PDR is compulsory, however, no one can force you to make the most of your opportunities. Try and discuss what the issue is that is preventing you from making the most of PDR with your manager. In many ways, PDR simply mimics what good managers do anyway, but not everyone has had good experience of PDR, so you may need to try it and see what happens. People sometimes feel their job is too mundane to warrant a review or to write objectives for, or else they say they just want to 'come to work, do a good job and

go home', which is fair enough. But everyone has frustrations at times about their work, or ideas on how things can be improved, and PDR gives everyone the chance to discuss their ideas and be listened to. At the very least, it gives you the chance to talk about yourself and any factors that affect your work.

Do I have to talk about my aspirations?

Only if you want to. There may be little your manager can do to help you achieve your personal goals; but there might be. Some people may want to move on, others may be thinking of going part-time or retiring. Others may want to have more responsibility, learn something new or take on a greater challenge. Your manager can only help if they know about these things, but it is up to you to decide if you want to talk about them.

Is feedback one way, or I give my manager feedback as well?

It is always a good idea for a manager to ask for feedback. If they are unsure what to ask for, suggest that you tell them what you would choose if there was one thing they could ask you to continue doing, stop doing and start doing. (see Appendix 5 for more on giving and receiving feedback.)

Why doesn't PDR link directly to reward, such as merit pay?

There are other processes for deciding if and when a change in remuneration is warranted. PDR may well draw on the same evidence and is a good way for you to think about what this evidence might be. But we want to avoid having more than one process for deciding reward levels. Also, many organisations have found that if they discuss development and reward in the same review, fewer people agree they have development needs, leading eventually to reduced performance (which, in turn, makes it less likely they will get greater rewards). The review can, if you wish, be put forward as part of the case for a change in reward.

What about re-grading; can this be discussed in PDR?

Much the same response applies to this as given for change in reward. The annual PDR meeting is not the time to focus on re-grading, though it may provide evidence that there has been a change in role that needs to be looked at using the re-grading process, and one of the outcomes of the PDR may be to agree to look at the case for a re-grading exercise.

What if I am on probation?

For those on probation, a review discussion should be held no later than mid-way through their probation period. Some departments have a separate review format for probationers, so check with your Administrator if you are not sure.

Do the one-to-one meetings that happen throughout the year need to be formal?

Not unless you want them to be. Nor is there any agreed timing for these. Because of this, there is a danger they are forgotten, or irregular. Some managers put one-to-ones in their diary at regular intervals (e.g., every 6-8 weeks) to make sure they happen and that all staff get them. Other managers have frequent contact with staff individually and use some of this time to discuss the work and progress against objectives informally.

My department's PDR process is not the same as my friend's department. Why?

The University does not have a single, imposed system. Instead, Personnel Committee agreed a set of principles for departments to follow, and these principles allow for some local variations to meet the needs of the department. In practice, the differences tend to be minor and anyone moving from one department to another would see many more similarities than differences.

Is it true that some departments do not have a PDR system?

Yes. The majority of departments do have PDR, but, sadly, some are yet to introduce it, though this is gradually changing for various reasons, including:

- Upward pressure, particularly from those who come from other organisations and are surprised to find there is no appraisal system in place in their new department.
- Downward pressure from the University leaders, who recognise PDR is a powerful way of ensuring everyone pulls in the same direction.
- External pressures, from government and funders, who want to see how we make use of and develop the resources they help to fund.

APPENDIX 4:

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

During the discussion, it is likely that your manager will provide you with their thanks for your achievements and comment on areas of development. Remember that because of the PDR principle of *no surprises*, your reviewer will not be raising significant new performance issues with you in this meeting. However, they will review progress with you over previous objectives and summarise how they see your overall performance.

You may also want to comment on ways in which your manager has helped you in the last year, or suggest changes in what they do when they manage you. Here are some guidelines on giving and receiving feedback to help this discussion.

GIVING PRAISE

Your manager will appreciate any thanks you want to give for their support over the past year. Remember to let them know exactly what you found helpful, by giving examples, so that they are able to repeat it!

For example: “I found it very helpful that you allowed me to do Project X in my own way after we had discussed it, and only come to you when I had queries.”

GIVING CRITICISM

If you want to ask your manager to do something differently, or let them know about something you didn't find helpful, the most effective way to raise this is to be factual and constructive about your criticism, and give examples.

For example: Instead of saying “You're not supportive enough,” give information which will help your reviewer know what you want them to do differently:

“You asked me to make the changes to the database just before you went on holiday, which meant that I was unable to talk to you about the queries I had. It would have worked better, I think, if you had let me know about this a week or so earlier, so that we could have discussed it more.”

RECEIVING PRAISE

It's important to accept thanks or praise that is offered, even if you find it a bit embarrassing. After all, you wouldn't want your manager to stop giving you thanks because they felt you didn't want to hear it! So, avoid self-deprecating remarks such as, "It was nothing ... anyone could have done it."

RECEIVING CRITICISM

Your manager may identify objectives or aspects of your work where they feel you have not made enough progress. How will you cope with this? When we feel we are being criticised, it is natural for this to raise uncomfortable emotions because we care about what we do and how others see us. However, if you allow yourself to get angry or defensive, it will be more difficult to discuss a way forward.

When you feel yourself reacting badly to criticism, take a deep breath by breathing out a little more than you would normally would and then taking a deep breath in. This will help to take the edge off the feelings and the pause will prevent you from speaking without thinking. You might even suggest taking a short break to give you time to digest the feedback.

If you feel you are being criticised unreasonably, try to ask questions to find out more about your reviewer's reasons for making the comments.

Hopefully, any criticism you receive will be constructive – it will help you identify exactly what it was about what you did that was perceived to be wrong or in need of improvement, and it will focus not on the past but on what can be done to put things right.

None of us like being criticised, but if your reviewer provides information which you can act upon, this will help your development. If you disagree, try to give your reviewer information which explains your viewpoint without becoming defensive.