



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**



A GUIDE FOR  
MANAGERS

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# PDR: THE REVIEWERS' GUIDE

Oxford Learning Institute



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# INTRODUCTION

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This short booklet is for any manager who undertakes, or is about to undertake, Personal Development Review (PDR) with their staff. Its aim is to cover the process and the principles behind PDR at Oxford and to pass on hints and tips from those experienced at PDR.

Our PDR system is flexible, so can vary slightly from department to department; variations occur in the paperwork, process, timing, and responsibilities, as we base our approach to PDR on a set of principles to follow rather than on a prescribed approach. Anyone who understands the workings of one department's PDR will understand that of another; there are many more similarities than differences. However, it means you need to look at the specific guidance for your department's PDR, and familiarise yourself with how the guidelines have been put into operation where you work.

For more support on PDR, speak to your administrator, look at the Oxford Learning Institute website or contact [bill.dunn@learning.ox.ac.uk](mailto:bill.dunn@learning.ox.ac.uk).

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# THE ROLE OF PDR

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PDR is the University's appraisal process for support, academic related and research staff. Academic staff members have their own appraisal system, though academics who also manage staff often participate in PDR.

The PDR process takes place across the year through regular one-to-one meetings and progress checks, and culminates in the *annual review meeting*. The annual review meeting provides the space, time and opportunity to summarise achievements and lessons learned, to reflect on the year past, to look ahead to the year to come and to agree new objectives and any development needed to ensure goals are achieved.

For the University, PDR is important because it helps align the work of individuals with the broader goals of the department and University.

As a manager, PDR gives you the chance to sit down with your staff and talk about them and their work, find out what motivates them, what aspirations they have and to explore the challenges they face at work and how these can be met.

For the individual, PDR provides time and space in which they can think about the year gone and the year to come, identify barriers to performance, suggest improvements in the way things are done, discuss priorities and goals, review the main tasks that make up their role and identify any development they need to tackle new challenges or to improve against existing ones.

Put simply, PDR provides a framework for those important conversations that should happen naturally but that are all too often shelved due to the hurly burly of work.

PDR stands for:

- **Personal** – it is about the person, and helps integrate individual aspirations and capabilities with the needs of the University and the challenges of the role. But it also covers performance, through the development and achievement of objectives;
- **Development** – it is about the development or changes needed to enable individuals to do their job well and to develop their potential, if they want;
- **Review** – it looks backwards to learn lessons, and then looks forward to plan the year to come.

The PDR process ensures that staff members receive constructive feedback and support, together with the recognition and encouragement they deserve when things are going well. It increases managers' awareness of their staff as individuals, and helps individuals understand the challenges facing their team, manager and work area.

The annual review is not a place of summary judgement, and certainly not the place to raise a performance issue for the first time. The principle of 'no surprises' is paramount. Specific aspects of unsatisfactory performance should already have been addressed by the time of the annual review, just as praise should have been given when due. If there have been issues to do with unsatisfactory work, the annual review may be used to summarise these and to cover the progress made, but is not the place to raise the issue for the first time. If there have been substantial concerns about an individual's performance at work, these should be dealt with under the performance management process, which might lead to disciplinary action (see the Personnel Services website for how to manage unsatisfactory performance). Significant performance issues are not dealt with via PDR, though they would inevitably form part of the review.

Overall, PDR makes sure that we all understand the contribution we make and that everyone is pulling together in the same direction. It helps you to manage, support and develop your staff.

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# THE PDR PROCESS

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There are three stages to the PDR process:

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 Appendix 1.

## STAGE 1: PREPARATION

Preparation usually starts when a reminder arrives from your administrator or personnel person that all PDRs must be completed by a certain date (if your department carries out PDR for everyone within a defined timeframe) or that someone's PDR is due (if your department spreads PDRs across the year). This reminder should give you at least three weeks before the due date of the review meeting, and often gives more time. To prepare you:

1. Agree a date, time and duration for the PDR review meeting with the individual (if this has not already been done as part of last year's review).
2. Send the individual a copy of any planning form your department uses (often called a 'Form A'). This might be sent direct to the reviewee by the administrator. You might also want to send:
  - a copy of their Job Description
  - a reminder of any team or departmental priorities that will be relevant to the year ahead
  - a reminder of their objectives for last year.

Ask them to complete the planning form and return it to you at least a week before the agreed review meeting.

3. Review their draft planning form and send back any comments you have. This ensures there are no surprises at the review meeting; both of you know what will be covered.

4. Review any notes you have made from meetings or observations at work on the person's work over the last year, with particular focus on their objectives and key work duties. If you don't keep some form of

notes, you might find it difficult to recall what happened over the last year with regard to someone's work.

5. Remind yourself of departmental priorities and think ahead to the challenges that your team will face in the coming year and the priorities for them.

6. Ensure you won't have any interruptions during the review meeting and that you set the tone of the meeting by ensuring the location is conducive to a relaxed and confidential discussion.

## STAGE 2: REVIEW MEETING

Once you have both settled into the meeting room, start things off with a quick reminder of what you are both there for, the structure you had in mind (do they agree with that?), how long you think it will take, where you want to get to by the end (e.g., do you want to have the record of the meeting completed by the end, or are you happy to draft it and send it to the individual for their signature afterwards, and are they happy with this?) and a quick reminder that this is their PDR and therefore you expect to be doing more listening than talking.

The amount you have to steer or shape the conversation will depend on the individual, but it should be at the minimal level required. Listen as much as possible and encourage them to suggest ideas and to come to valid conclusions.

Often, the form that is used to record the meeting contains a number of areas to discuss and you can use this to help structure the meeting, but be prepared to digress and be flexible.

It is right that you identify areas that need improving, but remember to include ideas on *how* to improve. It is equally right that you take the opportunity to say *thank you* for work well done and to show your appreciation of the positive contributions made by individuals. To be constructive, your feedback should be:

- Balanced – seeing the positive as well as the negative and getting these in proportion.
- Factual – dealing with facts, not opinions (give examples of good work/poorer work and why it was good/poor)
- Forward looking – focusing on how to improve/maintain performance
- Supportive – offering any guidance and help needed to bring about desired performance.

And because this is the PDR meeting, none of what you say should be news to the individual. It should simply be a summing up of feedback already given.

The 'record of the meeting form' (often referred to as Form B) sums up the review meeting and what has been agreed. Most reviewers simply make notes against each section and then complete it afterwards. Form B tends to cover the topics

below (or very similar – forms differ slightly in the topic order but the content is broadly the same):

1. *Key areas of the job and any changes in role*

This involves the reviewee looking back at last year's objectives and summarising what they see as their main achievements against each (Where did they get to? What stood out for them as the main achievements?)

It also asks them if there have been any significant changes in their responsibilities over the last year. Does their job description still describe what they actually do? If not, what has changed and why?

PDR is not the place to start re-grading jobs (that is a different process), but if it revealed significant deviation between the job description and the work done, it might prompt a reassessment of an individual's role and grade. In general, however, this section of the form simply identifies where slight amendments to the job description might be needed.

2. *Progress against objectives, and any factors that got in the way of achievement.*

This section of the form focuses on progress against last year's objectives and what might have hindered achievement, but it is also worth thinking about factors that helped, as both are important. 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 resources were not available. Or, it may be that the individual has found a way of doing something that is worth sharing.

When it comes to looking at the year to come, you might both feel that an objective that was not fully achieved last year is worth carrying forward, so you would want to know what might have hindered its achievement in the year gone in order to remove the obstacle.

3. *Objectives for the coming year*

Reviewees will differ in their ability to look ahead and identify objectives. There are several ways they can do this. They can:

- Look at each of the main points on their job description and identify potential objectives for each of these;
- Think about priorities and challenges to come and decide if any of these require specific objectives;
- Think about what they feel is needed most to improve the service they give and use this as the basis for objectives.
- Think about their key development needs and base an objective or two on these.

There may be some objectives that are not directly related to the job description. For example, you might want two of your team to work together to improve a process your team uses, or you might want the individual to talk to a group of stakeholders to ensure their needs are being met. You might include an objective linked to the person's aspirations. For example, they may want to find out more about what happens in another team, or acquire a qualification that would enable them to progress in their field or career. Although not directly related to their immediate job description, such development can lead to improved job satisfaction, though the degree to which you are able to support personal aspirations will depend on what is being sought, budgets and time.

Note also that this section of the form refers to 'agreed' objectives. You should reach agreement on relevant objectives and not simply impose them.

For some roles, objectives may be unchanged from the previous year because the job has a particular focus and the important thing is to maintain the agreed standard.

By the end of this part of the review, you will probably have up to ten objectives, depending on the complexity of the job. You may have a lot less. Better to have three or four 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 them SMART, which means making them:

**S**pecific – pin down exactly what you want to happen and by when, what resources are needed.

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

**A**chievable – neither too easy, nor too hard. If the individual does not believe it can be done, they won't even try.

**R**elevant – it should obviously relate to the person's job or to their development or aspirations

**T**imely – 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 your writing.*

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

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

Suddenly, we can see what the problem was, we can see what is meant by 'improve', we know what writing we are talking about, and we know by when we are going to bring about the improvement. The objective will, of course, depend on your joint analysis of what the underlying problem is.

But how will they improve? That's where the next topic comes in ....

#### 4. *What development is needed?*

When thinking of 'development', think broadly. It is much more than 'going on a training course'. Development could be:

- Working in a team to achieve a goal;
- A project;
- Observing someone else carrying out a task;
- An experience, such as attending a meeting on your behalf;
- Being coached;
- Setting up a small group to discuss a topic and to learn from each other;
- Having a mentor;
- Reading something;
- An online course.

If they identify development needs to you as part of their planning, encourage them also to explore ways of meeting these needs so that when they come to the review meeting they have an idea of the options.

Some staff may need more guidance on how to meet development needs than others and it may well be that they only make a note of the need, and not the way of meeting it. It may take more research to identify options for meeting development needs.

Think also of the support they need in order to achieve the agreed objectives as well as the development. This may take the form of advice and guidance, coaching, new equipment or software, or adjustment of the work or of the working environment.

The net result of the review meeting will be greater clarity regarding next year's priorities and goals, and you might also have identified some development needs. In some departments, any development agreed during the review meeting is

listed on *Form C* – the form that goes to Personnel or to your administrator to say you have carried out the PDR meeting. In this way, someone central can review the development needs emerging within the department and can identify any trends or patterns, or needs, that might be met as a group.

Usually, you will complete the record of the meeting form (Form B) from your notes and then ask the reviewee to sign it. The record form may have a box for Comments which can be used to note anything that doesn't fit easily into one of the designated categories, or to mention any points of difference, those these are rare.

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 and of picking up on any issues that are emerging within the department.

### STAGE 3: FOLLOW UP

In many ways, the follow up is the most important part of PDR as this covers not just getting the paperwork completed and sent 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 is where it needs to be. Departments usually place a copy of the record of the meeting form (Form B) on the reviewee's file so that the manager can access it, and they send a copy to the reviewee so they have a reminder of their objectives and of the discussion. Occasionally, you may be sent a copy to keep. If so, bear in mind the requirements of good data safety and keep it somewhere where it remains confidential.

During the year, you should meet with the reviewee on a regular basis to discuss progress and any support they need, and to check that any agreed development is taking place. How often you do this will depend on the objectives and on the workflow, but we recommend that it should not be less than once every two months. These one-to-ones can be quite short, but they give you the chance to monitor progress and to continue to be supportive. Without regular one-to-ones, you cannot shape performance, you will not be aware of issues affecting performance until it is too late, and you cannot give the feedback that is needed if the principle of *no surprises* is to be upheld, so always diary these in advance and ensure they happen.

The whole cycle then begins again.

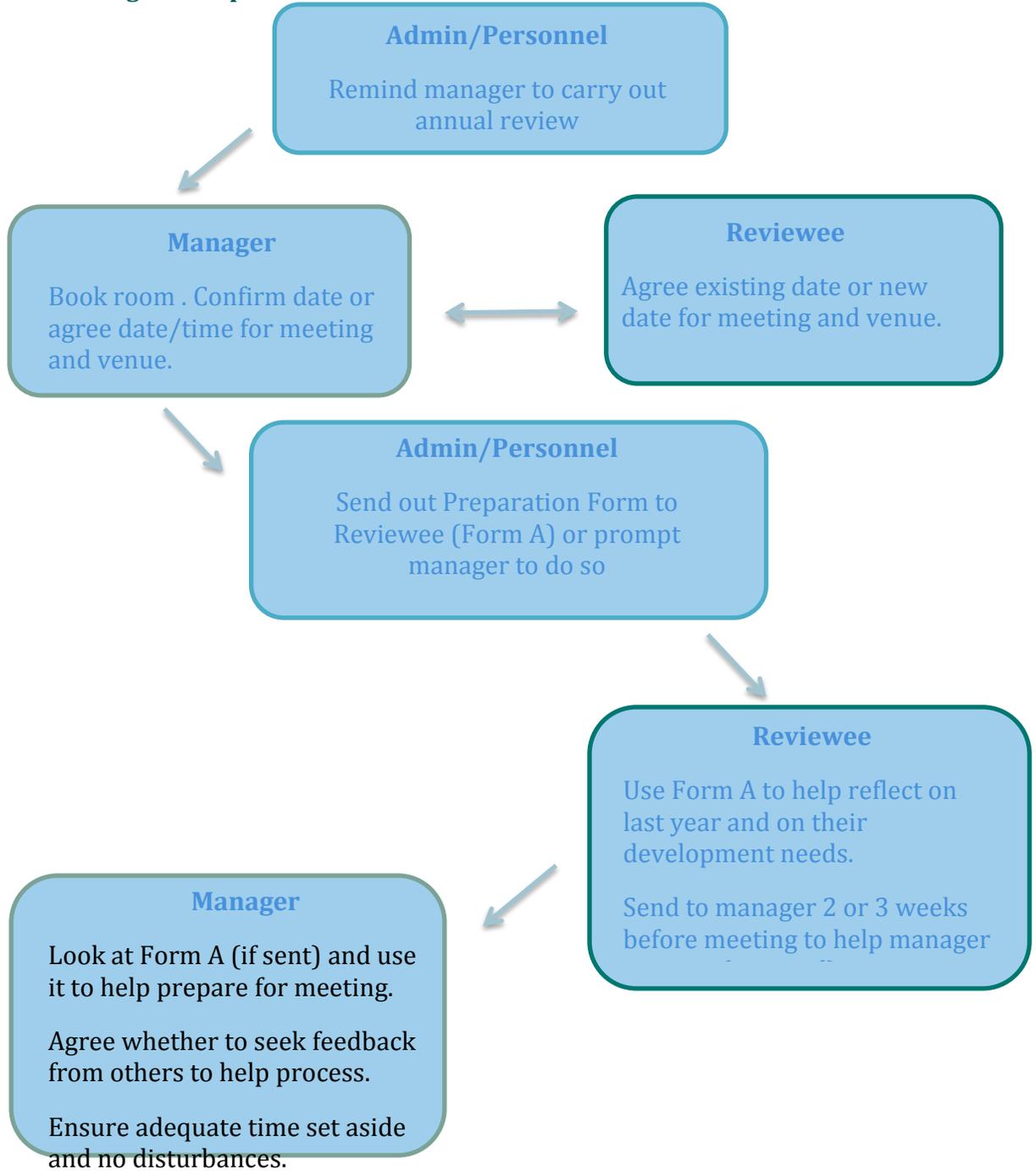


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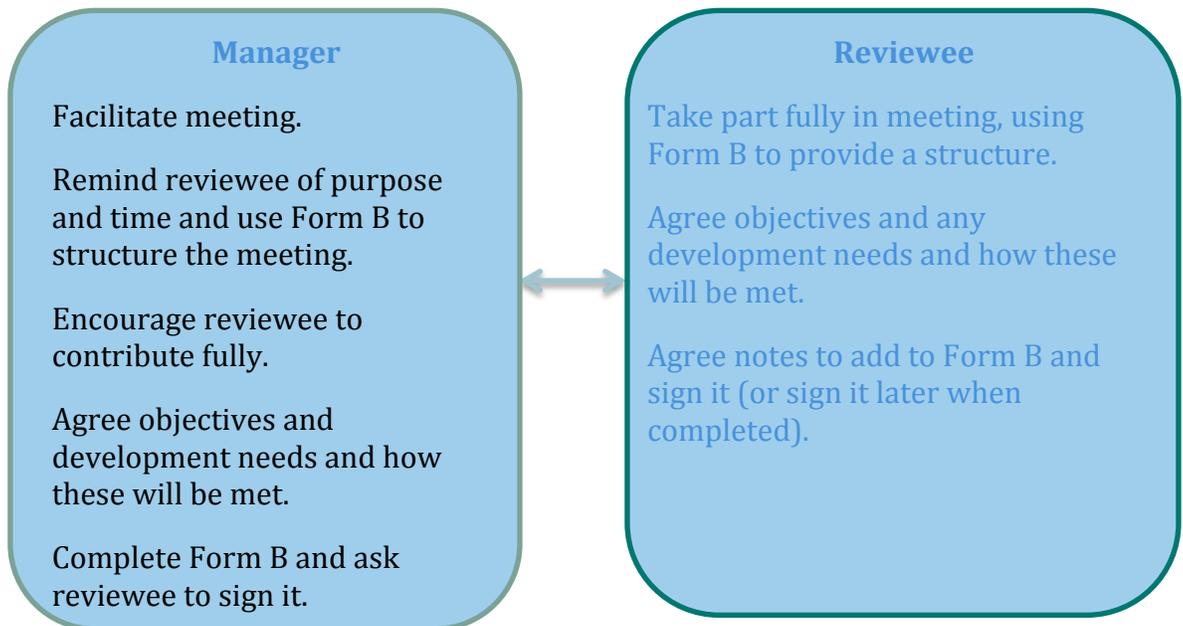
# APPENDIX 1: PROCESS FLOW CHARTS

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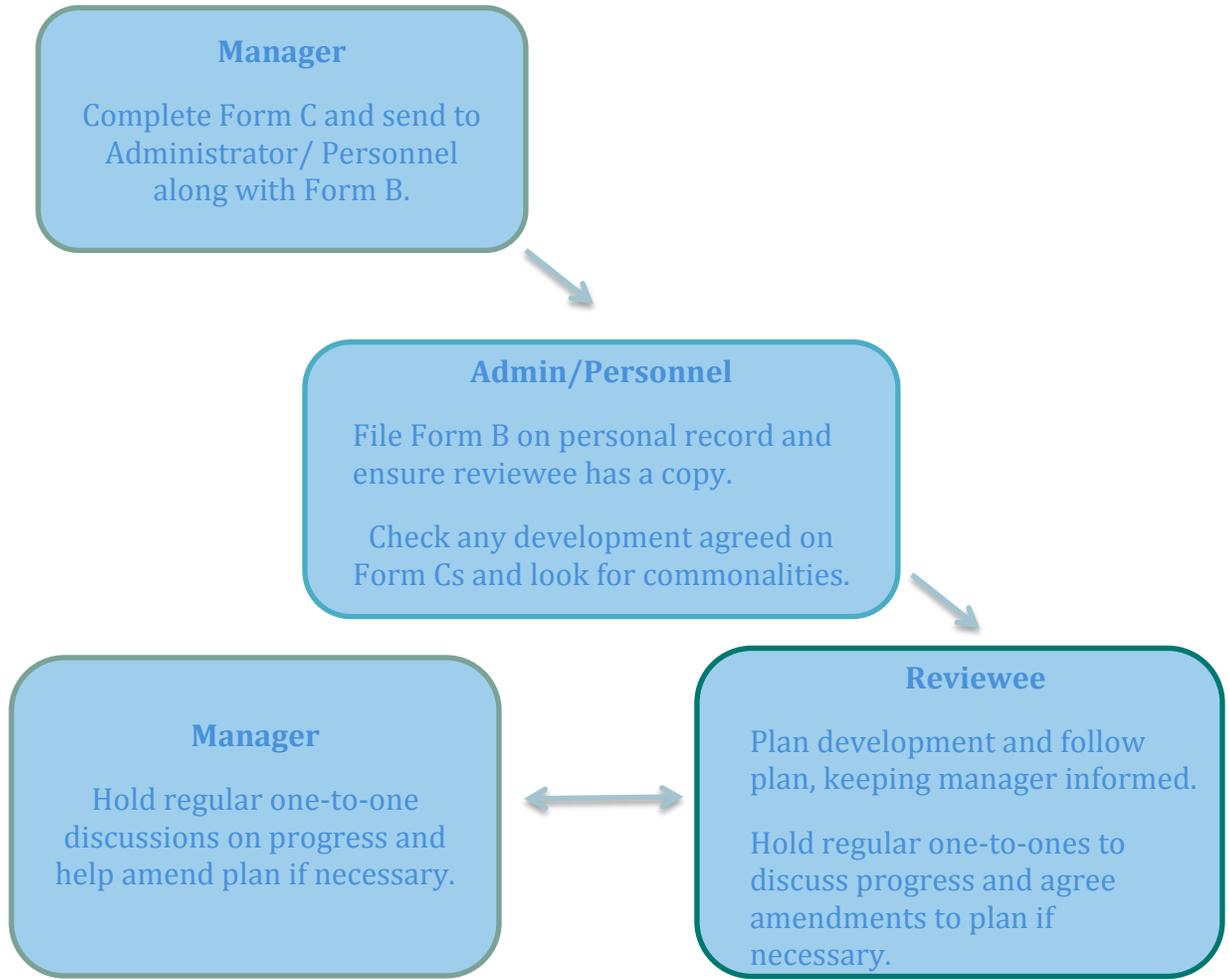
## Stage 1: Preparation



## Stage 2: The Annual Review Meeting



**Stage 3: Follow up**



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## APPENDIX 2:

# HINTS AND TIPS

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

### **Preparation**

“Some reviewees may have difficulty completing Form A. This may be because the wording does not always suit everyone (which might be because they have English as a second language or because of other literacy issues). Be prepared to help. The most important thing is not how much they write, but that they reflect on the year gone and have thoughts on what they think they want to achieve in the year ahead. Form A is there to help them think through what they want to say. They may not need to (or be able to) answer every question. Encourage them to do what they can and support those that need help.”

“People don’t always send you Form A. Encourage them to. You will usually find it useful to see what they have in mind and it gives you time to reflect on it and identify those places where more discussion might be needed.”

“If there are differences of perception or of focus in the planning, leave these until the meeting rather than engage in an email exchange or semi-meeting in advance of the agreed date, unless the difference is a real showstopper, which has never happened to me. You can then explore the differences at the meeting.”

### **The annual review meeting**

“Make sure the room is suitable. I did one in a big room that had two sofas and that didn’t feel quite right. It wouldn’t be right to do it across opposite sides of a desk either. I prefer to sit around the corner of a desk in the meeting room. I also like to have coffee and biscuits, as this seems to give the right feel.”

“Don’t ever ask anyone to do their 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. My manager is good at just getting the right feeling ... business-like, but also relaxed.”

"I quite often don't write a lot down when we're discussing things ... I try to leave it to the end of each section and then say what I'm writing and ask if the person agrees. Other times, I've just jotted the key points and we've agreed I'll write it up afterwards and send a copy for signing. If you do that, though, it's best to do it soon afterwards otherwise your notes stop making sense."

"There are times when I realise I'm talking too much, but I now have a rule that if I've gone on for more than a minute I shut up and get them to talk. It's never quite 50/50, but I try and get as close as possible."

"Everyone's different. Some of my staff want me to take more of a lead, whereas some want to go through whatever they've put on Form A and kind of lead it. I try and pick up on what works for them ...."

"Leave enough time. Most of mine take about 30-40 minutes, some take less, but I always book about an hour and a half, and there have been times I've been glad of it ...."

"Last time, my boss 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?"

### **Follow up**

"Suggest that they keep their copy of their objectives on their computer desktop and just open it now and then and jot down a few notes about what they've done. It makes a big difference if you have a few notes when it comes to the prep time."

"I like to keep a copy of their objectives handy so I can have a quick look before one-to-ones, otherwise it's impossible to remember what we 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. When I didn't do that I used to struggle a bit with PDR ..."

"I did have one person who disagreed with something I wrote on the form, and who left a comment saying so. That's fine. We agreed to disagree. It didn't come to anything more because it wasn't a big point. Other than that, it's usually not hard to agree."

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## APPENDIX 3:

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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

They should. At worst, it should be 50/50. Remember, it is *their* PDR. Ask open questions and encourage them to arrive at conclusions and ideas for themselves. In that way, they will be more committed to the way forward. PDR is about agreement, not about 'telling'. For example, you could encourage them to suggest better ways of doing things. Value their contribution.

### **What if I can't meet their expectations with regard to development?**

Then at least they 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 you cannot meet an expectation, explain why not and say what you can do. There are always considerations of time, budget and work demands, but be careful not to let the demands of work obliterate all else, or else morale will fall and so will the quality of the work done.

### **Should PDR annual meetings take place at the same time for everyone in my team?**

Some departments do this; others spread out the annual review meetings for individuals (perhaps basing the timing on the individual's start date). If you have a large team and a lot of review meetings to hold, you will probably need to spread them out. If your department usually carries reviews out at the same time, but you have a lot of reviews to carry out, check how much leeway there is.

### **Is PDR the place to deal with poor performance?**

The PDR annual review meeting should not be used as the primary place to address poor performance. Poor performance 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. Make sure you are aware of the Discipline process

and best practice in dealing with any poor performance. Consult your Personnel adviser, if you have one, or look at the Personnel website for advice and guidance.

**What if the person works for more than one manager, or is officially managed by one person but spends 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. You might seek feedback from other managers involved in managing the individual, or even hold a joint review meeting with the agreement of the individual.

**Who should decide on the objectives for the next year?**

They should be agreed jointly. The individual should take responsibility for thinking of possible objectives, and then forward these suggestions to you in advance of the annual review meeting. You should ensure that they 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. Quite often, reviewees look to the manager to take a lead on setting objectives, but, if this is the case, always make sure they participate and help shape the final objectives.

**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 the person does 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, you cannot force someone to make the most of their opportunities. Try and find out what the issue is that is preventing them from making the most of PDR and point out the benefits. 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 sell it to some staff and explain the benefits. Some staff may feel their job is too mundane to warrant a review or to write objectives for it, 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 gripes or ideas and be listened to. At the very least, it gives them the chance to talk about themselves and any factors that affect their work.

### **Does everyone have to talk about their aspirations?**

No, only if they want to. There may be little you can do to help them achieve their 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. You can only help if you know about these things, but it is up to the individual to decide if they want to tell you about them.

### **Is feedback one way, or should the manager ask for feedback as well?**

It is always a good idea as a manager to ask for feedback. Try asking what else you can do to support or help them. Or you could ask them what they would choose if there was one thing they could ask you to: continue doing; stop doing; start doing.

### **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 staff 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 the individual wishes, 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 about those on probation?**

For those on probation, a review discussion should be held no later than mid-way through their probation period and then another about a month before the end of the probationary period. Probationers don't have PDRs as such but probation reviews follow much the same format. If your department does not have a prescribed procedure for probationary reviews, you can use the format of a PDR, but check with your Department Administrator/Personnel support person first.

### **Do the on-going one-to-one meetings that happen throughout the year need to be formal?**

Not unless you want them to be, but it is best if they are more formal than a 'chat beside the water cooler'. It helps cement the manager/managed relationship, which does not need to be a distant relationship but does need some element of separation.

### **My department's PDR process is not the same as my colleague'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 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 those 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.