

How to manage poor performance

Rationale and key points

Addressing poor performance concerns in nursing practice is a crucial but sensitive topic. This “how to” article emphasises that a supportive and proactive approach is essential to fostering a positive work environment, improving patient care and empowering nurses to thrive. Nurses or managerial staff addressing poor performance must have the knowledge and skills required to do so effectively with sensitivity and care and must work within their level of competence.

- Early intervention is key: Addressing performance issues early on can foster constructive dialogue, preserves relationships and maintain a motivated and productive team.
- Focus on understanding what aspects of the nurse’s performance were incorrect, what has been learned by all parties from the situation and how this can be applied to the nurse’s future practice.
- Develop a collaborative action plan: Working with the nurse to create a SMART action plan ensures clear goals, timelines and resource allocation.

Reflective activity

"How to" articles can help to update your practice and ensure it remains evidence-based. Apply this article to your practice. Reflect and write a short account of:

- A time you addressed poor performance with a colleague or team member or how someone may have helped you to improve your own practice.
- How the situation was approached. Were any of the approaches mentioned in this article used and what did you learn from the situation?
- Your strengths and weaknesses when addressing performance concerns.

Keywords: To be drawn from the Nursing Standard taxonomy.

Nursing is a demanding profession and maintaining high standards of care is crucial for patient safety and well-being, in addition to the well-being of the healthcare team. However, even the most dedicated nurse can encounter challenges that impact their performance (Germain et al, 2010). As a nursing leader, manager or colleague, addressing poor performance concerns therefore effectively becomes paramount. In addition, in the UK, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) Code and standards (and elsewhere other relevant regulatory codes) provide the standard of care and practice expected of the registered nurse and may be used during the exploration of poor performance. This “how to” article explores approaches for navigating these situations while fostering a supportive environment for improvement.

Addressing poor performance in a timely and effective manner is important for:

- Patient/service user safety and improving the patient or service user experience.
- Safe and effective working of the healthcare team.
- The reputation of the nursing profession in the public’s eyes and compliance with the NMC or other regulatory Codes and standards of care.

Preparation and equipment

There is a broad spectrum of circumstances within which management of poor performance can take place. These may include, more generally, as part of coaching, mentoring and clinical/management supervision, through to part of a reflective discussion for revalidation or registration renewal. It can, however, occur more formally, through line management, where addressing poor performance may be part of developing a performance improvement plan (PIP), investigatory proceedings or as part of a disciplinary process. There are key components relevant to all situations but the approach and detail on how this should be managed will vary according to the situation. It is important to remember that not all poor performance will need a formal approach and often an informal discussion and guidance can lead to an improvement in performance. However, it is also important to note that there may be rare situations where the performance issues are so serious that the nurse has to be suspended in order to properly conduct an investigation, which may result in disciplinary proceedings, referral to the NMC, and occasionally criminal proceedings. As in all situations of poor performance, this has to be handled sensitively for all involved and it is vital that adherence to formal procedures is properly followed.

In preparing to manage poor performance, you need to be well-equipped to address the situation with clarity and empathy, before initiating a conversation about performance. Adhering to the healthcare organisation's policies and procedures is crucial for effectively addressing instances of poor performance. Always gain advice from appropriate staff such as your line manager and/or human resources (HR) department if required and needed.

Gathering concrete evidence is crucial. When dealing with issues relating to poor performance, emotions can run high for everyone involved. It is therefore vital not to rely solely on gut feelings. Collecting specific and objective evidence that demonstrates the poor performance issues is important at the preparation stage. This could include: tracking missed deadlines with dates and project details. A simple spreadsheet or a dedicated task management “app” on the computer can help track missed deadlines. Furthermore, you should gather reports highlighting errors or mistakes made by the nurse in question. For example, the task description (such as discharge teaching for Mrs X), the specific missed date, the original due date and the reason for missing the deadline (perhaps an unexpected event that called the nurse away). This is a clear example of a gathered report that highlights the reasons for errors.

In preparation for how to manage poor performance, document any patient or colleague feedback that stems from the nurse's performance. Ensure you utilise relevant performance metrics that deviate from expectations. An example of a performance metric are specific aspects of patient experience, measuring performance from the patient's perspective by asking them about specific aspects of the care delivered by the nurse, such as their communication skills. Also, feedback/concerns about clinical practice from other members of the healthcare team. Refresh your understanding of the nurse's specific role and responsibilities, by referring to the original job description outlining the key duties and required skills. In addition, review any past performance evaluations to identify any established goals and expectations. Consider any relevant team goals or objectives the nurse contributes to.

While not an excuse for underperformance, it can be helpful to acknowledge any personal or professional challenges the nurse might be facing that could be impacting their work. You may consider looking into any major life changes that could be affecting the nurse's focus. For example, are there problems with resources or equipment to achieve their role, or team dynamics that are hindering performance? Organise your thoughts and prepare ahead your key talking points. For example, outline concrete instances that can be used as examples of where performance fell short of expectations. Be clear about what you hope

to achieve from the conversation. It is important to follow all local policies throughout the process to gain support from your manager and the human resources department and to not undertake to manage poor performance alone. The nurse may have the right to representation from a union or colleague during any discussions or meetings in line with local policy. It is important to note that the nurse whose performance is being managed should agree to the meeting notes and be provided with a copy. In the UK, they also have the right to request a copy of all information held about them under the Data Protection Act 2023 (local laws must be followed). By agreeing to the meeting notes, the nurse ensures their perspective is accurately recorded and understood.

Procedure

1. Be clear from the onset what you are doing and why because managing poor performance can potentially be a sensitive and upsetting situation for all involved.
2. Early intervention is key. Do not wait for issues to escalate before initiating a conversation.
3. Maintain confidentiality, only involving those who need to be involved. This will vary depending on the situation. For example, at times this may involve your own line manager and the human resources department.
4. Respect the nurse by setting an appropriate time for a meeting, arriving on time and offering a friendly approach. Ensure union representation or colleagues have been invited and can attend in line with human resources policies.
5. Create a safe, quiet and appropriate confidential setting for open and honest communication. This may be a private office or meeting room free from interruptions. Schedule the meeting during a calm period when both you and the nurse have dedicated time to focus.
6. Be very clear about the nature of the meeting, why you are meeting and whether this is an informal or formal meeting.
7. Begin the conversation on a positive note. Briefly acknowledge the nurse's contributions and past achievements before transitioning to the performance concerns. A way of doing this, for example, will be to say "Thank you for your hard work on the recent breastfeeding campaign. I appreciate your dedication, but today I want to discuss some areas where there could be some improvement"

8. Use open ended questions, those that cannot be answered with a simple affirmation such as “yes” or “no”, to explore with the nurse: what went wrong?; what impact the poor performance may have had and on whom?; what could have been done differently to achieve the correct or appropriate actions?; and what actions the nurse will take in the future in terms of learning from the experience? An example could be: “Explain to me from your perspective what happened that day”.

9. Avoid generalities. Use the evidence you have gathered during the preparation and gathered from the nurse in the meeting itself to clearly illustrate the areas needing improvement. For example: "I've noticed several missed deadlines on recent records. For instance, providing discharge teaching materials to Mrs. X and her family members. It was documented in her chart that it was due last week and it's still outstanding."

10. Give the nurse an opportunity to explain their perspective. Listen attentively without interrupting. Ask clarifying questions to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying reasons behind the performance issues. An example of how to ask clarifying questions would be to say: "Tell me more about the challenges you've faced in meeting those deadlines".

11. Once the context has been explored, work collaboratively to develop Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound goals for improvement. These goals should be:

- **Specific:** Clearly define what needs to improve – for example, to improve the clarity or timelines of nursing record data. In performance improvement aiming for incremental improvement is advisable. Starting with a smaller realistic target allows for steady progress without overwhelming changes.
- **Measurable:** Establish a way to track progress and assess success – such as weekly nursing record data entry error reports.
- **Achievable:** Set realistic goals that challenge but are attainable with effort.
- **Relevant:** Ensure the goals directly address the identified performance issues.
- **Time-bound:** Establish a clear timeframe for achieving each goal.

12. Where it is appropriate to do so, formalize the agreed-upon goals and action steps into a documented Performance Improvement Plan (PIP). The organisation or human resources department should have documentation available online to achieve this. The PIP should clearly outline:

- **The specific areas of improvement:** Restate the identified performance issues.
- **Action steps:** Detail the specific actions the nurse needs to take to achieve the set goals.
- **Resources:** Identify any resources or support the nurse will receive to facilitate improvement (such as training courses, and mentorship programs).

13. Ensure regular meetings are planned and undertaken to track progress and provide ongoing feedback. You should be available to offer support and encouragement throughout the process. This is crucial in facilitating improvement.

14. In some cases, when the nurse fails to meet the agreed-upon goals within the specified timeframe, further action may be necessary. This could involve a formal written warning, additional training, or, in exceptional cases, disciplinary action. Throughout the process, documentation relevant to the level of formality of the performance issue is essential. For example, a coaching conversation will be much less formal and detailed than a disciplinary process.

15. All discussions and appropriate documentation/record keeping regarding performance concerns should be maintained confidentially, with access restricted to those directly involved. These may include details of discussions, the PIP itself and progress reports. The nurse should agree to the meeting notes, the nurse should ensure their perspective is accurately recorded and understood. Providing the nurse with a copy of the notes promotes transparency and fairness. It allows the nurse to review the content, clarify any misunderstandings, and ensure that the information is accurate and complete. The Data Protection Act 2023 grants individuals the right to access personal information held about them. This includes information related to their employment, such as performance reviews, disciplinary records, and any other relevant data.

Evidence base

Quality and performance improvement are integral parts of value-based care in nursing practice. Literature generally supports an early intervention in managing poor performance in a structured and positive way and can be key in maintaining a motivated and productive team (Keegal, 2013, NHS Employers 2022, Horne, 2024). Scheduling a private meeting and approaching it with empathy, not accusation, is crucial as part of addressing issues early on. When problems fester, emotions can build up

and communication may break down. Addressing concerns early demonstrates that you value the relationship and want to work things out. This proactive approach can help maintain a positive and healthy dynamic.

Understanding the root cause of poor performance allows for targeted support and removes potential assumptions as to the cause or issue (Gangidi, 2019). The incorporation of reflection and subsequent professional dialogue can serve as a powerful mechanism for addressing performance concerns (Mann et al, 2009). This approach can be strategically employed as a framework for structuring a conversation about underperformance or as a subsequent step to reinforce the discussion's outcomes.

By encouraging self-reflection, individuals can be prompted to critically examine their performance, identify areas for improvement, and develop a deeper understanding of the factors influencing their work. This introspection aims to foster a sense of ownership and accountability (Nesbit 2012). Subsequent professional discussions provide an opportunity to share these reflections, seek feedback, and collaboratively develop strategies for enhancing performance. This collaborative process can build trust, open lines of communication, and create a shared commitment to improvement (Mann, K., et al, 2009). Whether reflection is used at an early stage or as a follow-up action, this approach can contribute to a more constructive and productive conversation about poor performance challenges, ultimately leading to enhanced employee development and healthcare organizational success (Nesbit, P. L, 2012). Reflection remains central to current nursing practice (Lucas, 2023) and is a central core of revalidation aiming to enhance a registered nurse's practice and protect the public from poor practice (NMC, 2024).

It's important to recognise that change is most likely to be effective when working in partnership with the nurse to create a SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound) action plan (Logan et al, 2024). This plan should outline specific goals for performance improvement, identify resources and training opportunities, and establish clear timelines for evaluation. (Downs and Hodge, 2022) stated that a collaborative action plan is a roadmap for achieving a shared goal through teamwork. It outlines specific steps, assigns responsibilities, and sets clear timelines for evaluation.

Mentorship offers a safe space for skill development and fosters a sense of accountability. Embracing coaching and mentorship is a fantastic way to support nurses and empower them to thrive in their careers (Rossiter et al, 2024). Coaching involves targeted support; a coach provides focused guidance on specific skills or challenges a nurse is facing. This could be anything from mastering a new procedure to improving communication with patients. Coaching also unlocks potential. Through coaching conversations, nurses

can gain a deeper understanding of their strengths and weaknesses (O'Grady et al, 2024). This self-awareness empowers the nurse to set goals and develop strategies to achieve them.

Coaching is all about progress. A coach will work with the nurse to create an action plan and hold them accountable for following through. Mentorship is a more enduring relationship where a seasoned nurse offers guidance and support to a less experienced one. Mentors can share their wisdom and experiences, helping their mentees navigate career challenges, develop professionally and build their network. (Rossiter et al, 2024) emphasised that mentorship provides a space where the nurse can ask questions, experiment, and learn from mistakes without judgment. This fosters a sense of trust and psychological safety, which is crucial for growth.

Hospitals and healthcare organisations can play a vital role in fostering a culture of coaching and mentorship by; implementing programmes that connect new nurses with experienced colleagues who can serve as mentors and in providing training opportunities for nurses to develop their coaching skills (Rossiter et al, 2024). This empowers them to coach their peers and contribute to a supportive work environment, recognising and rewarding nurses who actively participate in coaching and mentorship programs. This sends a message that these activities are valued by the organisation.

Measuring and evaluating performance in healthcare is a crucial process for ensuring high-quality care, efficiency, and positive patient outcomes (Aiwerioghene et al, 2024). It involves a systematic approach to gathering data, analysing it, and using the insights to improve the healthcare system. Performance data informs choices made by healthcare professionals, administrators, and policymakers. This can lead to better resource allocation, targeted interventions, and improved service delivery. By identifying areas where performance falls short, healthcare systems can implement targeted changes to enhance the quality of care. By tracking performance, healthcare organisations can gain insights into how well they are using their resources. This can lead to smarter spending and a better allocation of staff, equipment, and other materials (Rodríguez-Fernández et al, 2024).

Implementing changes based on performance evaluations can be an ongoing challenge (Dufour and Duhoux, 2024). The goal is not to reprimand, but to help the nurse reach their full potential. Performance discussions should occur in private and information should be shared only on a "need-to-know" basis. Remember that nurses are dedicated professionals facing challenges. A respectful and supportive approach enhances the likelihood of a positive outcome. Encourage open and honest dialogue throughout the process. This allows for early identification of issues and fosters a culture of continuous improvement.

Patient safety remains paramount. However, it is vital to consider any underlying factors impacting performance and explore potential accommodations. By adopting a structured, supportive approach, nurse managers can more effectively address performance concerns in nursing and healthcare. Focusing on development, early intervention, and open communication fosters a positive work environment and ultimately improves patient outcomes.

In conclusion, by implementing these preparation strategies and procedures for managing poor performance, nursing leaders and managers, can create a supportive environment where performance concerns are managed constructively. Through open communication, clear expectations, and targeted support, individuals can be empowered to reach their full potential. By fostering a culture of growth and improvement, nursing teams can enhance patient care and job satisfaction (Disconzi et al, 2024).

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