Small SU Guidance on Performance Management

Introduction

Recent research on small and specialist HE Students' Union's highlighted the lack of clarity on good practice for oversight, support and accountability relating these organisation's most senior staff members, irrespective of the SU's stage of development and structure.

Where staff were employed by the institution (with or without any form of SU Board), it was often unclear as to who directs the staff member's workload, sets objectives and priorities. These staff did seem to have better experiences of induction and more structured access to development often funded through University budgets.

Where oversight was carried out by trustee board members (or governing/ advisory boards), the performance management and support processes were often clearer however, many Board members seemed unsure how to do this well.

In drafting this guidance we are mindful of the diversity of governance models in the sector; the guidance therefore applies to University employed staff members who are responsible for Students' Unions as well as those staff members employed directly by the SU. It also applies to SU's with formal trustee boards, with other oversight structures such as advisory boards and those with no boards of any form and/or with elected student officers.

The guidance is based on the frameworks in the Voluntary Sector Code of Governance and specifically Code of Governance for Students' Unions, adapted for these specific small and specialist organisations as well as human resource management good practice.

The drivers for providing effective quality performance management and support to senior staff include:

Compliance:

Trustees' responsibilities as set out in the Charity Commission Guidance (CC3) The Essential Trustee:

- responsibility to ensure that the power to delegate is being properly exercised
- ensuring that the resources of the charity are used effectively
- delivering on the strategy for the beneficiaries (members)
- acting with reasonable care and skill in overseeing the charity
- managing risk to the organisation.

Trustees'/ organisations' responsibilities to comply with employment law and health and safety law

Ethical:

Students' Union's consider themselves to be ethical organisations; treating their people with dignity and respect is a critical element of these ethics and values. This means that all staff including senior staff need an environment in which they can thrive. Effective induction, development, wellbeing support, objective setting and performance review all play a part in dignity at work.

Business Case:

Good people management practice can enhance engagement, performance and commitment. Effective performance management is critical for organisational success. Members of staff need to understand what is expected of them, they need to have the skills, resources and support they need to succeed and deliver for the organisation. A reputation as a good employer builds trust with all stakeholders. Poor people management can result in employee ill health (physical and mental), absence, high employee turnover, impact on reputation and impact on delivery.

Performance Management Processes:

There are many elements to an effective and integrated performance management process, however, these do not have to be complicated. Performance management processes often combine these elements into formal appraisals or performance development reviews including periodic interim reviews. The elements include:

Performance Review
This is where the past performance is reviewed. The key is to establish the definitions of required performance in order that this review is as objective as possible.

Performance review would normally consider:

Outcomes: Review against previously set and agreed objectives and measures. How much progress has been made? Is this adequate, above adequate, not meeting expectations?

Behaviours: Review of HOW the outcomes were achieved, whether the individual has conducted themselves in the way the organisation expects their staff/ leaders to behave.

Top Tip: ask the staff member to provide their review of progress in advance of the meeting. This can aid understanding of where differences in perspectives may lie and focus discussion on those key differences.

Giving Effective Feedback
Reviewing performance requires skill in giving timely, proportionate and objective feedback. When giving feedback it is important to remember that feedback has one of two purposes and is forward facing:

- **Reinforcing:** making sure people know what they are doing well so they keep doing it. This is vital in both meeting objectives and in motivating members of staff

- **Redirecting:** helping someone understand what it was they did that perhaps didn't quite work, the impact it had and therefore what it is you would like them to do differently.

Top Tip: be specific with feedback, it is not helpful feedback to say, "you did a great job there". It is more helpful to give the exact reason why what they did was so good. " Your presentation to the University was really informative, well researched and you had evidently practiced it"

Top Tip: Praise is not just for appraisal time, think about when you give feedback outside of these processes.

Setting Objectives

Usually, objectives are most effective if they are specific, stretching and have clearly defined outcomes. Objectives that focus on behaviours can be equally effective and should be considered in addition to outcome based objectives.

One of the most popular models for setting objectives is to use the SMART structure:

Specific – what does the person need to achieve, what will be different

Measurable – contains measurable outcomes, KPI or target for example

Achievable – possible to accomplish but stretching, they have the resources to achieve it

Relevant- related to the organisation's objectives and priorities. For senior SU staff, link to strategy, financial plans and business plans

Timebound – dates and milestones, even if recurring, a date for review should be included

Examples of good outcome objectives:

- To increase the number of students who access the academic advice pages of the SU website by 10% by next July because that will support our aim of providing quality support for students in time of need.

- To write a paper by March next year that will persuade the University to increase our block grant by 2% for the next academic year in order that we can deliver an effective academic representation training programme

Examples of good behavioural objectives:

- To develop my skills in advising the officers on campaigning activity. I will have attended a campaign skills course and will be able to work with the President to write a campaign plan for the cost of living campaign by January next year.

- To develop my understanding of the options for legal structures for our SU so that I can advise the key stakeholders on next steps by May next year.

Top Tip: Be careful when setting objectives with measures – consider the extent to which the measures are absolutely necessary and relevant. Measurement is important but it can become all consuming.

Discussing Development

Any performance review process should consider the continuing professional development of the staff member. What do they believe they need in order to be able to deliver the objectives that have been set? What does the organisation feel they need? What does this mean for the relationships with the University, the Board (if relevant), their role.

Development at work can often be narrowly interpreted as training opportunities. Formal, structured training is incredibly valuable and is a core part of the discussion on development.

Professional qualifications or academic study can add real value to both personal and organisational development. These are not, however, the only potential development interventions available.

Consider stretch objectives that provide an opportunity for learning in themselves. Consider networks, coaching, mentoring, action learning, conferences, reading and professional memberships.

It is increasingly important to think about blended development – where different options come together to support learning.

Development plans should normally be driven by the skills needed to deliver the objectives, the behavioural standards expected and the longer term personal development of the staff member.

For many people, learning is in itself a motivator; investing in an individual's development demonstrates the value that the organisation places on that individual which in turn can support performance, increase engagement and reduce risk of turnover.

360 Reviews

Some organisations use 360 reviews to support performance review, personal development and in some cases, behavioural objective setting. A 360 review is a tool that allows the person being reviewed to invite feedback from a wide range of colleagues and stakeholders. The goal is to gather a variety of perspectives from people to aid understanding of how the person's performance impacts on others. Feedback is provided anonymously.

For senior SU staff this can be particularly helpful given the diversity of the relationships that they are required to build within the SU and with students and university staff.

Like any method of performance review they have the advantages and disadvantages which should be carefully considered before embarking on this process. There is usually a cost associated with 360 reviews.

Top Tip: Use a suitably qualified, experienced person to administer and to feedback on the outcomes of the 360 review.

Top Tip: Carefully consider who the right respondents are and brief them in how to give constructive feedback

One to Ones/Reviews

Performance management is a continuous process; it is not something that just happens once or twice a year. Whilst a traditional appraisal is often the cornerstone of a performance management process, normally taking place annually with a mid year review of some sort, organisations are increasingly moving towards more agile processes.

Whatever your organisation's approach, regular, structured and relatively frequent conversations focusing on objectives, wellbeing and development are good practice. One to ones are a good place to start and for senior SU staff, consider having these at monthly intervals.

Senior staff need a space to share concerns, ask for help, talk about their personal wellbeing in the same way as any other staff member and one to ones would normally be the place to do that. It is therefore crucial that the relationship with the person who leads these conversations is strong and trusting.

For SU's where there is no Board/ Governing Body or Advisory Board and the staff member is employed by the University, this would normally be done by the University Line Manager. Consider whether it would be helpful for any student officers to be updated with progress on objectives for example and how that might happen.

For SU's with Trustee board and the staff member is employed by the University, again these will normally be conducted by the Line Manager. There should be a formalised process for reporting progress on objectives to the SU Board at agreed intervals and/or based on exception where there is notable variance from the plan.

Where the staff member is employed by the SU, it can be most appropriate to utilise the skills and experience of an external (Lay) Board member (perhaps the Vice Chair, a

supervising trustee, a trustee with HR expertise or, if the Chair is an external, the Chair) to take on this role, in most cases.

Top Tip: Think about using Wellbeing Action Plans (see MIND link in Resources Section below) in routine one to ones for senior staff.

Top Tip: Continuity of support for senior staff is crucial, particularly when it comes to support, development and review of objectives. Lay (external board members) or other external support perhaps from another SU CE can be used for this purpose. It also helps manage risk to the organisation.

Top Tip: It can be helpful to have external guidance for these processes where the skills and experience are lacking in Boards. Ask the University for HR support if available. Consider suggesting a mentor for your staff member.

Top Tip: one to ones are good opportunities for the line manager/ trustees/ officers to also seek feedback from the senior staff member in the spirit of effective leadership and partnership.

Appraisals

Appraisals bring together the elements of performance review, feedback, objective setting and development planning in one conversation. They usually happen annually (sometimes more frequently) and good practice is to have at least one interim review.

All parties should know when they are to happen, the meetings should be long enough to cover everything, take place somewhere private where you will not be disturbed and everyone involved should have adequate notice to prepare.

They are normally formally written down in order for all parties to know what the expectations are, what has been agreed and to be accountable and transparent. (See section on Templates.)

Where the University is the employer, who conducts the appraisal is usually clear. (See section on University Role). Consideration should be given to the involvement of the SU as detailed in the section on University Role.

Where the SU is the employer, there are a number of models and approaches that can be taken (see Section on Board Role.)

Top Tip: Include the timelines for senior staff appraisal and performance review in the Board's cycle of business (if relevant)

Top Tip: There should be no surprises at appraisal or formal review times – this should not be the first time you share concerns about failure to achieve targets or concern over behaviours.

Top Tip: It is not enough to have a process, it is as important to conduct the process with skill and expertise.

Board Role

Performance management (oversight of the most senior SU staff member's performance) should be driven by the Board in student organisations that have a Board of Trustees, a Governing Board or even an Advisory Board, irrespective of whether the senior staff member is employed by the University or an independent SU.

The role of these Boards should be:

- To agree the process (with the employer if that is different to the SU)
- To ensure that suitably skilled individuals participate in, conduct and oversee the process
- To ensure that the needs of the student body are represented in the priorities and objectives of the senior staff member. (This is particularly relevant where the process is conducted by a University line manager).
- To ensure that the priorities and objectives reflect any agreed strategic objectives/ targets, financial plans of the organisation.
- To approve final objectives and to receive progress reviews (ensuring these are collectively deliverable given the resources and capacity)

Where the senior staff member is employed directly by the SU, there are a number of models and approaches for who conducts an appraisal:

- Chair and Vice Chair conduct the appraisal jointly (where one is a student officer, and one is a lay trustee with experience of line management)
- Chair and a suitably qualified/ experienced lay trustee, where the Chair is a student officer
- Either of the above options with support from someone outside the organisation to provide continuity: e.g., a CE from another SU, an HR professional from another SU, an external
- facilitator (this usually has a cost attached), someone from the University's HR team. The key is to have someone who will provide continuity across more than one year.

Top Tip: The Board should neither be micro-managing the senior staff member nor failing to challenge them. It is key to have a culture of supportive accountability in a robust and trusting relationship.

University Role

Where the senior staff member is employed by the University, it is vital that the performance review process, objective setting, training and development is carried out with the involvement of either the SU Trustees, governing/ advisor Board, or, where this does not exist, with the involvement of elected student representatives (usually paid elected officers). The key here is to ensure that the performance outcomes of the person who is accountable for the SU are linked to the current and future requirements of the student body.

It is therefore recommended that University Line Managers consult with either the governing body members and/or elected officers to ensure that their perspectives, the SU's core strategy objectives

and students priorities are evidently accounted for in agreeing performance targets and the senior staff member's priorities.

There are a number of models for this approach, it is up to the respective Students' Union and institution to establish which is most suitable for their context:

- Representative of the Board/ student officers (the SU) are included in the formal performance review meetings

- There is a pre-meeting between the line manager, senior staff member and SU representative in which the SU's perspectives are shared and discussed.

- The SU (a suitably skilled member of the Board) has a performance review meeting with the senior staff member and this then forms part of a further discussion with the formal line manager, with objectives being finalised.

- The line manager and SU have a pre-meeting to share respective thoughts on performance and objectives with the Line Manager then holding the formal meetings with the Staff member, separately.

- The line manager asks all parties to complete preparation forms in advance and these are combined in the formal meetings to come to an agreement

Top Tip: When deciding which of these models is most appropriate, consideration needs to be given to the SU's structure, resources and the skills of any individual tasked with participating in or leading performance management.

Induction Processes – Probationary Reviews

Recruitment for any staff member is time consuming and can be costly. The CIPD (in its annual Resourcing and Talent Planning survey) calculates that for a senior staff member, the cost can be between £3000 and £5000. Retaining talented staff makes good sense both financially and morally.

Poor induction, lack of SMART objectives and failure to review performance during the probationary period are main causes of turnover in the first few months of employment.

Whoever is responsible for the employment of the SU senior staff member in any of the models found in small and specialist SU's, setting objectives in those very early weeks of employment and conducting regular reviews against those objectives is crucial.

Clarity on measures, expected standards and timelines will reduce the likelihood of miscommunication and conflict when it comes to any significant decisions about continued employment at probation.

Top Tip: Setting initial probationary objectives does not have to be complicated; the template below for objective setting and review (appraisal) can be used for this purpose.

Top Tip: When considering appropriate induction, get help from someone experienced – this might be one of your external trustees, someone senior at the University, someone

who has HR experience, someone in a local SU like an experienced Chief Executive or HR Manager. You don't have to plan this on your own if you've never done it before

Top Tip: An induction plan should allow your new senior staff member to understand your students, your organisation and your institution so make sure they get to meet staff, students, trustees, key university links and that they have time to ask questions, read information and reflect on what they are hearing.

Checklist

If this is the first time you have been involved in performance management, here is a useful checklist of things to consider:

- Have you set clear objectives for this person for the period you are reviewing?

- Have you given adequate notice of the performance review meeting (or probationary review meeting)?

- Does the senior staff member know what is expected of them in that meeting?

- Are the right people going to be in the room?

- Do you all know our roles in the performance review and do you all know what to expect?

- Have you asked the senior staff member to send you all their thoughts in advance of the meeting?

- Have you agreed how the meeting will be structured and who will lead it?

- Have you agreed who will write up the outcomes of the meeting?

- Have you agreed the process for agreeing those outcomes?

- Have you set new SMART objectives for the next review period?

- Who needs to approve these objectives?

- Have you ensured that anything to be discussed will not be a surprise to the staff member?

- Have you met your legal and moral obligations in the way you communicate routinely with the staff member? Do you have regular one to ones?

- Are there any aspects of the review that you may need professional guidance or advice on? For example, what is appropriate training and development?

Resources

These are some helpful resources for staff members, their line managers and for trustee boards regarding performance management relevant to this sector:

- CIPD Performance Management Factsheet

- Association of Chairs – Appraising your Chief Executive

- ACEVO – Realising the Potential of Governance – Report of the ACEVO Governance Commission

- ACAS Guidance on Conduct and Capability Procedures When Managing Performance

- MIND Wellbeing Action Plan

NUS Charity/Guild HE Templates

- Appraisal/Review template

- SMART Objectives template

- One to One Meeting template