Ruth Seddon HR

Managing the Probation Process

A probation period allows you to assess the suitability of the employee for the position, while making sure they have had the training and development needed after they joined you. This document will give you guidance on the process. While ultimately you could dismiss an employee in probation, often with minimal risk, I will not address that process in detail here. Every probation dismissal is different and I would recommend you contact me for detailed advice on how to dismiss someone safely.

In most cases employees are successful in probation and you can use the probation review as a motivational tool, setting the groundwork for a future successful contribution to your business.

Induction

In my Induction guidance, I recommend you develop a training plan to introduce an employee to their new job, bringing in the activities they need to know gradually and in an organised way. What the job entails may be obvious to you but it will be completely new to them and it is important to go at their pace, not overloading them but equally not having them sitting around twiddling their thumbs because they are learning more quickly than you expect.

It is helpful to set some clear goals, eg in week 1 they will learn one or two particular processes, week 2 another, and so on. This is good for the employee because they know what they have to achieve, and good for you because you can then measure them against those goals. So do try to create a structured plan at the outset.

Review meetings during probation

As a manager you should be meeting with your new employee regularly to see how they are getting on. By "meeting" I don't mean a chat in the kitchen or in the office with phones ringing around you distracting you: I mean a sit-down meeting in a quiet room to talk about how things are going. I would recommend at least one formal probation review meeting (depending on the length of probation) but most of the meetings can be informal, on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

How are they finding the work? Are they having any difficulties with it? Is there anything they feel they need more training or help with? Do they understand the different departments and roles?

The most sensitive thing to address is when they have made mistakes. This is difficult to discuss but key to managing the employee.

If they tell you they have made a mistake:

Rule 1 – don't throw your hands up on horror or react dramatically. If this happens in the office, best to take them aside to discuss it. Then ask them to explain what they have done, why they did it and how they think they should rectify it. We all make mistakes – your job as a manager is not to fix

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everyone's mistakes but to coach and train them so (a) they make fewer mistakes and (b) if they do make a mistake they know how to fix them themselves.

Rule 2 – be open-minded about whether the company or even you yourself have contributed to this happening. We are all used to how things work and sometimes a fresh perspective can be useful in shining a light on procedures which actually don't work, are inefficient or simply pointless. If you realise you did not give enough guidance to the employee so contributed to the problem, be honest about that and learn from it. Managers are not all-knowing and sometimes make mistakes.

Rule 3 – make sure it is fixed and, if necessary, documented so it does not happen again. If they keep making the same mistake over and over, that becomes a matter for a more formal probation meeting.

If they have made a mistake but don't realise it

These are more difficult conversations, they must be held in private and you must prepare for the conversation carefully.

Rule 1 – have evidence to hand and go through it with them. Start the conversation something like "I noticed this the other day, it's not the way we would normally do things so I want to talk it through with you".

Rule 2 – try to put the conversation in the third person and ask for their views. Instead of saying "you did this, didn't you" try saying "it looks to me like you did this, is that right?" This instantly de-personalises the situation and gets them involved in the conversation. It goes without saying that there should be no raised voices and no aggression. Always try to talk from the evidence – "looking at this record it seems to me that you may have misunderstood…" Ask them why they did it, you may find they were confused or had even been given incorrect instructions by someone else.

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Formal Probation Review

One or more formal review meetings should be held. It is absolutely crucial that you try to arrange the meeting before the probation period ends. If the probation period ends without a review meeting or trying to arrange one, the probation may end automatically. Whether it does or not depends on your contractual documents.

If someone is on long term sick towards the end or even for a chunk of time during the probation, it is permissible to extend the probation period by an equivalent amount of time. This should always be done in writing, and I can help you with that situation should it arise. You should never dismiss someone while they are absent from work due to sickness aand I recommend you get advice on that situation should it arise.

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Invite them to the meeting in writing in advance so they can prepare (email is fine). Arrange a quiet meeting room, ideally not a glass cubicle or glass walled office for privacy.

Documentation

A probation form can be useful, the kinds of things it should contain are the following:

Employee's Name
Job Title
Department and Manager's Name
Date of Joining
End of Probationary Period
Date of Review Meeting

You should rate the employee on things which are relevant to you, some examples are:

Quality and Accuracy of Work
Job Knowledge
Efficiency
Attendance & Lateness
Interpersonal and Communication Skills
Working with Others
Working to Deadlines
Overall Performance

You can rate on whatever scale you wish, it could be marks out of 10 or simply Improvement Required, Satisfactory, Good or Excellent.

Then a section which records issues for improvement and actions to be taken.

There should also be a section to record the decision – pass or extend, followed by what actions are to be taken of the decision is to extend.

If the employee passes, you could if you wish set out a further training and development plan

Finally, make sure both manager and employee sign and date the form.

Holding the Meeting

Make sure you have evidence to hand, either in paper form or notes. For example, if you have received a complaint from a customer about the employee, have the details with you so you can discuss it.

At the start of the meeting, reiterate that this is a probation review meeting and you will be taking notes.

Work through the form/agenda. For each area of performance you are measuring, give actual examples of the good and not so good (if relevant) aspects of their work. Give specifics and ask for

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their view or response on each example. Tell them what you think – if it's great, say so; if not so good, be direct about what they need to improve to become great. Focus on discussing facts, not opinions, for example "You are doing X things per day which is more/the same as/less than the average worker here".

If they have made the same mistake multiple times, do make sure you have the evidence to hand. Even if you don't have written notes, remind them of the conversation(s) you have previously had – "Do you remember we talked about this on the day when…"

Things NOT to do:

- Discuss anything not relevant to their work such as their private life (unless they raise it)
- Use third party accounts of their work unless they are verifiable and fact based, so for example don't tell them X thinks they are lazy.
- Ignore any complaints they make about others, if they raise something ask them to explain the issue, note it down and address it after the meeting (with HR)

You may need HR advice if:

- You have concerns about their performance and think they may not be up to the job
- They raise any issues about their health, particularly if they say it affects their work
- They complain about other people and their behaviour
- They use the word "discrimination" at any point

At the end, give the decision (hopefully a pass) and thank them for their work so far. Set out what you would like to see in the future and ask them what their aspirations are. Record any future training needs identified or the employee's "wish list" if they have one – you do not have to give them training which is outside their current job role but you may want to think about future development.

If the decision is to extend their probation give a clear reason why, the new probation end date and what you need them to do to successfully pass probation.

After the Meeting

Make sure they have a copy of the form you have completed. If they have passed, it is a good idea to issue a letter confirming it – it can be very motivational for employees. Suggested text would be:

> *Following our meeting on [date], I am pleased to confirm that you have satisfactorily completed your probationary period with the Company. Accordingly, we are pleased to confirm your appointment as a [job title].*

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If you have any questions concerning this confirmation of your appointment please let us know as soon as possible and we will do all we can to ensure these are answered.

We congratulate you on the satisfactory completion of your probationary period and look forward to your continued contribution to the future success of the Company.

Properly carried out, a probation review can motivate and help an employee feel part of the company, resulting in increased productivity and contribution to the business.

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