Performance Management Cycle for APS Supervisors
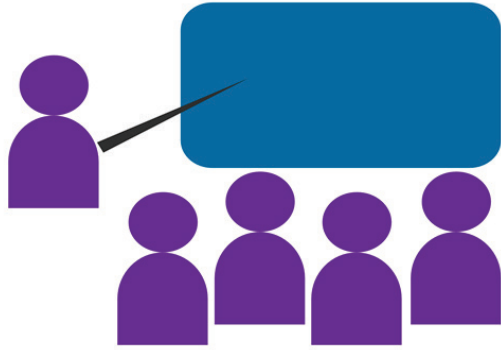
Figure 1 – The Performance Management Cycle

Introduction

As an APS supervisor, you have a complex position and are expected to fill many different roles. From APS program expertise to hiring, training, supporting, motivating, and evaluating staff, this can often feel overwhelming. One of the most important hats you wear is managing and improving APS staff performance. Your goal should be to do this with consistency and transparency. Ensuring APS investigators know what is expected of them leads to the goal of protecting APS clients and the overall success of the APS program.

In this brief we will detail the performance management cycle, which uses a continuous four-step procedure:

- Planning
- Monitoring
- Reviewing
- Rewarding

These steps are not static, and you may find yourself in one or more at the same time or in varying order. This brief defines each step and provides guidance regarding how you can apply them as an APS supervisor.

Performance Management Cycle: Planning

The first step in the performance management cycle is planning. Many APS programs already have performance plans created for their employees. These plans detail performance expectations that will inform performance evaluations. Whether you are using an existing agency plan, or creating one from scratch, use the SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) method to guide you:

- **Specific**: Spell out the tasks your investigator must perform. They should know what is expected and why. The more specific the goal the more effective the plan will be.

- **Measurable**: Investigators should be provided with information on what success looks like and understand how you will measure that success.

If your agency has accepted qualitative and/or quantitative data, use this in the plan; if not, think about methods you will use to measure success, outline those measures, and the source of information to assess success.

- **Achievable**: While you want staff to stretch and meet goals, your goals should not be so lofty as to be unattainable.

- **Relevant**: The goals should align with essential job requirements and/or key performance indicators in the APS investigator's position description as well as your APS program's mission. The Administration for Community

Living's Voluntary Consensus Guidelines for State APS Systems indicate "…43 states have developed benchmarks and metrics for program evaluation". If your state has accepted agency data, determine if any of the same data can be used to evaluate staff.

- **Time-Bound**: Investigators should know the time frame for completing goals and/or if activities are ongoing, how often they will be measured.

Here is an example scenario using the SMART method in an APS investigator performance plan:

One of your investigator's essential job functions is ensuring client safety throughout APS involvement.

You decide you will measure whether the investigator is achieving this goal based on two agency policies:

- Contacting the client within 24 hours or following appropriate policies when unable to do so.

- Using the least restrictive alternatives to alleviate an emergency or using legal intervention if alternatives do not exist and the client meets decisional capacity criteria.

Figure 2 – SMART Performance Plan

SMART Method	Performance Plan
Specific	• Discuss related policy and expectations for 24-hour contacts with clients and procedures to follow when unable to make contact. • Discuss using the least restrictive alternatives and, when appropriate, legal interventions. • Explain why following the procedures are important.
Measurable	• Your agency measures 24-hour contact completion through your case management system and you expect 95%-100% compliance. • You review 100% of cases submitted for closure and you will use the information you have gleaned from this process to determine if your investigator follows policies in emergency situations.
Achievable	• Your goals are both achievable and expected to ensure client safety.
Relevant	• Ensuring client safety is relevant to the investigator's job. • The agency also has benchmarks for the 24-hour contact that align with the measure you require.
Time-Bound	• You will have monthly and/or quarterly employee conferences to discuss compliance as well as an annual performance review.

Performance Management Cycle: Monitoring

Having regular staff conferences and talking about performance can be quite daunting. But, if you have created measurable items in the staff performance plan, you will be able to talk about whether performance is being met or not. You will cultivate a culture of accountability, while welcoming an open dialogue about barriers they encounter that impact their ability to be successful. Part of your job as a supervisor is assisting in removing those barriers when appropriate. You want to create a culture in which performance data is discussed and expectations are clear to ensure transparency with staff. This will ensure staff understand the areas in which they are doing well, and you will also be able to help them create an action plan in areas that need improvement. A best practice is to establish monthly or quarterly conferences to discuss progress and to document your meetings in conference notes. Monitor performance on all measurable goals and talk to staff about their performance, highlighting areas in which they excel to build staff confidence and rapport.

With regards to data, a core concept to keep in mind is the difference between quantitative and qualitative data:

- **Quantitative Data**: numerical data that can be easily obtained through your case management system. This type of data would tell you how many, how much or how often. Examples of this data include such things as how many cases are received, how many visits are made,

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and whether activities are performed and document timely.

- **Qualitative Data**: generated from observation or reading case notes to make determinations about the quality of an activity. Examples of qualitative data in APS include such things as the quality or completeness of an interview, whether appropriate collaterals were contacted, and whether an investigation is thorough.

While data is important to understanding performance, be cautious in the way you use and speak about data. Data is a starting place to understand performance, not an ending. It can help you identify *where* there is variation and the amount of difference, but you still must determine *why* there is a difference in the data. Also, you never want to judge performance solely on a number, you will want to discuss the actual practice that the number may reflect. Consider the following example.

Performance Management Case Example

Your agency has a target zone of 65-75% for substantiating allegations, but your investigator has a 10% substantiation rate. Obviously, there is a large amount of variation between the investigator's rate and the expected target zone, but the number alone cannot explain the reason for the difference. Perhaps there is a reasonable explanation for the difference such as the investigator is specialized and only assigned allegations in your agency that are less likely to be substantiated. Or the staff was on extended leave and only worked a few cases (i.e., a small sample). In these types of situations and others, you need to understand *why* there is only a 10% substantiation rate. It is your job to research the issue by reviewing cases and other relevant factors to determine if the investigator is not doing thorough investigations.

Your performance conversation should not be about the data but the underlying issues. You would not want to say, "you need to get your substantiation rate up to 65-75%". With this approach, you run the risk of the investigator simply substantiating every allegation just to make you happy.

Instead, focus your conversation on the work itself to ensure your action plan centers around the skills needed to perform a complete and thorough investigation. Continue to monitor that work using both qualitative and quantitative information. With this approach, you will ensure success and not just compliance. If you simply talk about a number, staff will not understand how that applies to actual work practice and might simply change behavior to meet the number alone.

View the APS TARC webinar "Using Data to Improve APS Services" for more information on this topic.

Performance Management Cycle: Reviewing

The third step in the performance management cycle is reviewing. Remember the plan you created during the planning phase? It is time to fill out a performance evaluation based on that plan. As indicated with the performance plan, many APS agencies may have a predetermined performance evaluation. Use all your conference notes, staff data, your impressions of the investigator's performance and other evaluative tools to help you fill out the evaluation. If you have been conferencing with staff regularly, then the feedback you provide in their evaluation should not be a surprise to them.

Evaluative tools can help monitor, train, and evaluate your staff. The three tools discussed further here are case reading tools, WISE evaluations, and the STAR method.

Case Reading Tools

Case reading tools should be used to help you determine the quality of the work performed in a case. It generates qualitative data. Case reading tools can be as simple as a check-off list that you would use to ensure activities are performed in a case to an assessment tool that evaluates certain areas of concern to more complex tools that attempt to review case quality in distinct detail.

The APS TARC blog "Steps of Developing a QA Process" includes Nevada's case reading tool.

WISE Visits

Another method for monitoring and evaluating your staff is WISE (Worker Interview Skills Evaluation) (Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2015) visits, where you assess your investigator's ability to interview clients and collaterals through direct observation. This is another example of gathering qualitative data. The direct observation of an investigator's interview provides invaluable information about their on-the-job performance, skill development, and training needs.

Consider doing this activity at least twice a year. You can create your own WISE tool to measure the interview skills you believe to be most important. Another option is to use or modify an existing WISE tool, such as the one from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

Shortly after filling out the WISE tool, follow-up with your investigator and use the information to coach them. Explain areas needing improvement and policies that were or were not followed, model behavior, and praise positive performance. You can also include information from these tools as measures incorporated into their performance plans and evaluations.

STAR Method

You may be familiar with the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) method (Developmental Dimensions International, Inc., n.d.) to help you fully answer job interview questions, but did you know the STAR method can also be used to monitor and evaluate staff? As an evaluative tool:

- **Situation/Task**: Consider the situations and tasks in the performance plan.

- **Action**: Consider the actions your investigator is taking to achieve the measurable goals and if goals are not being met, the actions needed to achieve those goals.

- **Results**: Continue to measure the results.

The data you use to inform the STAR review can include both quantitative and qualitative data.

Here is a sample questionnaire you and your investigator can use to apply the STAR method.

Sample Questionnaire Using the STAR Method

Review the investigators' performance measures:

1. Identify and describe tasks the investigator is doing well.

2. Identify tasks in which the investigator can improve.

3. Focus on 3-5 tasks needing improvement:

    a. Describe the situation/task.

    b. Describe the results as of the point of the review including what the investigator has done or not done to meet the task.

    c. Describe why you think the task is important.

    d. Describe what the investigator should do to meet the desired result (be specific and realistic; do not come up with ideas that are outside of your investigator's control; think about barriers and how to overcome those barriers).

    e. Agree on an action plan including a timeline to see improvement.

After completing the initial questionnaire and monitoring the results for the identified timeframe, you and your investigator can think through the following items to determine success:

1. Which tasks improved?

2. Which tasks did not improve?

3. Which tasks were difficult to complete and why?

4. What were some difficulties you encountered while trying to complete tasks?

5. What modifications will you make to meet the task in the future?

6. Agree on an action plan including a timeline to see improvement and/or disciplinary action if needed.

Additionally, when it is time to write an evaluation or in writing conference notes, you will also want to use the STAR method to frame your feedback.

Consider if your agency has 95%-100% requirement that an investigator makes a 24-hour contact with clients, and you want to praise that investigator for meeting that expectation.

Instead of writing:

"Jane did a good job in meeting the 24-hour contact requirement."

use the STAR method:

"To ensure client safety, the agency requires 95%-100% compliance in completing 24-hour contacts. Jane successfully met this task with a 95% compliance rate last quarter and has improved to 97% this quarter."

The APS TARC brief on "Quality Assurance in Adult Protective Services" provides an analytical framework and a deeper dive into methods of reviewing performance.

Performance Management Cycle: Rewarding

The fourth step in the performance management cycle is rewarding. Rewards for staff performance may be handled in a variety of ways depending on your agency. They may be monetary such as promotions, bonuses, or merit raises. Or they may be non-monetary such as special assignments, agency-wide or public praise/acknowledgement, and positive reviews for HR files. Whether you can reward through monetary means or not, it still is very important that you create some methods for rewarding your staff. Alternately, disciplinary action for poor performance is equally as important and cannot be overlooked. All staff should know that there is accountability - when work is done well there will be a reward and when the work is done poorly there are consequences, which may include human resources action, and opportunities for improvement.

Conclusion

The performance management cycle is a good model for ensuring your staff are aware of performance expectations and together you are working to ensure the investigator meets those expectations. Creating goals and activities to plan, monitor, evaluate, and reward will lead to their success and thus the overall success of the APS program.

The APS TARC recognizes that many APS programs have made establishing or improving quality assurance a program goal. This brief references and links to many of the documents created by the APS TARC to support this goal.

As always, If your state APS program is struggling with quality assurance, reach out to us.

APS TARC
Adult Protective Services Technical Assistance Resource Center

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References

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