

Training Manual: Managing the Probationary Period

Purpose: This manual aims to equip direct line managers with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively manage the probationary period of new employees. It emphasizes clear communication, adherence to South African labour law (BCEA & LRA), continuous feedback, and fostering employee success.

Target Audience: Direct Line Managers

1. Introduction to the Probationary Period

The probationary period is a crucial time for both the employee and the organization. It allows the company to assess the employee's suitability for the role and provides the employee with an opportunity to understand the organizational culture and job requirements. Effective management during this period is vital for successful integration and retention.

Key Objectives of the Probationary Period:

- Assess the employee's skills, performance, and suitability for the role.
- Provide the employee with clear expectations, feedback, and support.
- Identify any training and development needs early on.
- Make informed decisions regarding the confirmation of employment.

1.1. Assess the employee's skills, performance, and suitability for the role.

This involves a continuous evaluation of how the new employee is adapting and performing against the requirements of their position and the broader organizational context.

- **Skills Assessment:**
 - **Observation:** Regularly observe the employee performing their tasks. Note their technical proficiency, problem-solving abilities, and application of knowledge.
 - *Example:* For a software developer, observe their coding quality, debugging skills, and ability to learn new technologies.
 - *Example:* For a sales representative, observe their communication skills, product knowledge, and ability to close deals.
 - **Work Output:** Evaluate the quality and quantity of their work. Are they meeting deadlines? Is the standard of their work acceptable?

- *Example:* Review reports, presentations, completed projects, or customer feedback.
 - **Feedback from Others:** Gather input from colleagues, team members, or clients who interact with the new employee.
 - *Example:* Ask team members about their experience collaborating with the new hire.
 - **Alignment with Job Description:** Regularly refer back to the job description and ensure the employee is demonstrating the required skills and taking on the necessary responsibilities.
- **Performance Assessment:**
 - **Goal Achievement:** Track progress against any initial goals or objectives set for the probationary period.
 - *Example:* If a goal was to complete a specific training module within the first month, assess if this was achieved and the quality of their understanding.
 - **Initiative and Proactiveness:** Observe their willingness to take initiative, identify problems, and propose solutions.
 - *Example:* Did they independently identify an inefficiency in a process and suggest an improvement?
 - **Adherence to Processes and Policies:** Evaluate their understanding and compliance with company procedures and regulations.
 - *Example:* Are they following the correct protocols for submitting leave requests or expense reports?
- **Suitability for the Role and Organization:** This goes beyond just skills and performance; it considers their fit within the team and the broader company culture.
 - **Teamwork and Collaboration:** Observe how well they interact with colleagues, contribute to team efforts, and handle conflict.
 - *Example:* Are they a supportive team member? Do they communicate effectively within the team?
 - **Attitude and Work Ethic:** Assess their enthusiasm, commitment, and overall approach to their work.
 - *Example:* Do they demonstrate a positive attitude even when faced with challenges? Are they punctual and reliable?
 - **Cultural Fit:** Evaluate how well their values and work style align with the organization's culture.

- *Example:* Do they adapt to the company's communication style and norms?

1.2. Provide the employee with clear expectations, feedback, and support.

New employees need clarity on what is expected of them, regular feedback on their progress, and the necessary support to succeed.

- **Clear Expectations:**
 - **Initial Onboarding:** Clearly communicate job responsibilities, performance standards, key objectives for the probationary period, and company policies from the outset.
 - *Example:* During the first week, provide a detailed overview of their role, how their performance will be measured, and what constitutes success in the first few months.
 - **Ongoing Communication:** Reiterate expectations as needed and when new tasks or projects are assigned.
 - *Example:* When assigning a new project, clearly define the deliverables, timelines, and quality standards.
- **Feedback:**
 - **Timely and Specific:** Provide feedback promptly after observing performance, both positive and constructive. Be specific with examples.
 - *Example (Positive):* "The way you handled that customer query was excellent. You were patient and clearly addressed all their concerns."
 - *Example (Constructive):* "On the last report, the data analysis section could have been more detailed. Let's discuss how you approached it and how we can enhance it next time."
 - **Balanced Approach:** Ensure feedback includes both recognition of strengths and identification of areas for development.
 - **Two-Way Dialogue:** Encourage the employee to share their perspectives and challenges.
- **Support:**
 - **Resources and Tools:** Ensure the employee has access to the necessary tools, systems, and information to perform their job effectively.
 - *Example:* Provide access to relevant software, training materials, and internal knowledge bases.
 - **Guidance and Coaching:** Offer guidance and coaching to help the employee develop their skills and overcome challenges.

- *Example:* Schedule regular one-on-one meetings to discuss progress, answer questions, and provide advice.
- **Introduction to the Team and Culture:** Facilitate their integration into the team and help them understand the organizational culture.
 - *Example:* Introduce them to key colleagues and explain team dynamics and communication norms.

1.3. Identify any training and development needs early on.

The probationary period is an ideal time to spot areas where the employee could benefit from further learning.

- **Observation of Skill Gaps:** Notice areas where the employee's skills don't fully align with the job requirements.
 - *Example:* If an employee struggles with a particular software, this indicates a potential training need.
- **Employee Self-Assessment:** Encourage the employee to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses and identify areas where they feel they need more development.
 - *Example:* During a check-in, ask, "Are there any aspects of your role where you feel you could benefit from additional training or resources?"
- **Performance Feedback:** Areas identified for improvement during feedback sessions often point to training needs.
 - *Example:* If consistent errors are being made in data entry, training on data accuracy and attention to detail might be necessary.
- **Proactive Identification:** Based on the role and the employee's background, anticipate potential training needs.
 - *Example:* For a new hire in a technical role, proactively schedule them for advanced training on specific equipment.

1.4. Make informed decisions regarding the confirmation of employment.

The culmination of the probationary period is a decision about whether to confirm the employee in their role. This decision should be based on the assessments and feedback provided throughout the probation.

- **Review of Performance Data:** Consider all the information gathered regarding the employee's skills, performance, and suitability.

- *Example:* Review records of monthly meetings, feedback given, progress against objectives, and any documented concerns.
- **Alignment with Expectations:** Assess whether the employee has consistently met the expectations set for the probationary period.
- **Potential for Future Growth:** Consider the employee's demonstrated potential for future development and contribution to the organization.
- **Fair and Objective Assessment:** Ensure the decision is based on fair and objective criteria, free from bias.
- **Communication of the Decision:** Communicate the decision clearly and professionally to the employee, providing reasons if the decision is not to confirm employment. If probation is extended, clearly explain the reasons and the expectations for the extended period.

2. Legal Framework: BCEA and LRA

It is imperative that managers understand and adhere to the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) and the Labour Relations Act (LRA) of South Africa during the probationary period.

- **BCEA:** Governs basic employment conditions, including working hours, leave, and termination. Ensure all employment terms align with the BCEA.
- **LRA:** Provides the framework for fair labour practices, including dismissal. While dismissal during probation can be for a fair reason related to the employee's conduct or capacity, it must still be procedurally fair.

Key Considerations:

- The duration of the probationary period should be reasonable and clearly communicated in the employment contract.
- Any decision regarding non-confirmation or extension of probation must be based on fair and objective reasons.
- Employees on probation still have certain rights under the law.

3. Continuous Communication: Internal and External

Effective communication is the cornerstone of a successful probationary period. Managers must engage in both informal and formal discussions with the new employee.

3.1 Informal Communication (Weekly Interactions):

- **Purpose:** To provide ongoing support, answer questions, and address minor issues proactively.
- **How to:**
 - Schedule regular check-ins (e.g., brief daily or weekly meetings).
 - Be approachable and encourage the employee to ask questions.
 - Provide immediate feedback on tasks and performance.
 - Observe the employee's integration into the team and identify any challenges early.

3.2 Formal Communication (Monthly Probation Meetings):

Purpose: To provide a structured review of the employee's progress, discuss strengths and weaknesses, and plan for development. This will be the focus of Section 4.

The monthly formal probation meeting serves as a dedicated time for a more in-depth discussion about the employee's journey during their probationary period. It moves beyond the day-to-day interactions and provides a structured framework for assessment and growth.

- **Structured Review of Progress:**
 - This involves systematically looking back at the employee's performance over the past month against the agreed-upon objectives, key performance indicators (KPIs), and expected standards of behavior.
 - Managers should come prepared with specific examples of the employee's work, both successes and areas where they might have fallen short.
 - The review should also consider the employee's integration into the team, their understanding of processes, and their adherence to company policies.
 - *Example:* Reviewing the number of sales targets met, the quality of customer service interactions (if applicable), the completion of assigned tasks, and feedback received from colleagues.
- **Discuss Strengths and Weaknesses:**
 - **Strengths:** It's crucial to acknowledge and reinforce what the employee is doing well. This builds confidence and encourages them to continue those positive behaviours. Be specific in your praise.

- *Example:* Instead of saying "You're doing a good job," say "Your problem-solving skills were excellent when you addressed the issue with the X project. Your quick thinking prevented a potential delay."
- **Weaknesses (Areas for Development):** These should be framed constructively as opportunities for growth, not as criticisms. Focus on behaviors or outcomes, not personality. Provide specific examples.
 - *Example:* Instead of saying "You're not organized," say "I've noticed a few instances where deadlines were missed. Let's discuss strategies to improve your time management and organization."
- **Plan for Development:**

This is a forward-looking aspect of the meeting. Based on the identified strengths and weaknesses, the manager and employee should collaboratively create a plan for the upcoming month. This plan might include specific goals to achieve, skills to develop, training to undertake, or changes in approach to certain tasks.

- **Example: Addressing Consistent Late Coming**
- **Weakness Identified:** Consistent late coming has been noted on [mention specific instances or frequency]. This impacts team workflow and adherence to scheduled tasks.

Development Plan:

Discuss Underlying Reasons: The manager should first try to understand if there are any underlying reasons for the lateness in a supportive manner (without making excuses for the employee).

- *Manager:* "I've noticed you've been late on a few occasions recently. Is there anything that's contributing to this that you'd like to discuss?"

Reiterate Expectations: Clearly restate the company's policy on punctuality and the expected start time. Explain the importance of being on time for team collaboration and individual productivity.

- *Manager:* "Our company policy requires employees to be at their workstations by [start time]. Consistent punctuality ensures smooth team operations and allows you to start your day effectively."

Set a Clear Goal for Improvement: Agree on a specific and measurable goal for punctuality.

- *Manager and Employee (Collaboratively):* "For the next month, the expectation is that you will arrive on time every day."

Identify Potential Solutions: Brainstorm strategies the employee can implement to improve their punctuality.

- *Manager:* "What steps do you think you can take to ensure you arrive on time consistently?" (This could involve adjusting their morning routine, travel arrangements, etc.)

Monitoring and Follow-up: Agree on how the manager will monitor the employee's punctuality and when it will be reviewed.

- *Manager:* "I will be noting your arrival time each day this next month, and we can discuss your progress at our next monthly meeting."

Potential Consequences (if applicable and previously communicated): Depending on company policy and previous discussions, it might be necessary to reiterate the potential consequences of continued lateness.

- *Manager:* "As we discussed during your onboarding, consistent failure to adhere to company policies, including punctuality, can have further implications."
- The development plan in this case focuses on a behavioural change with clear expectations, monitoring, and collaborative problem-solving.

External Communication: While less frequent, managers may need to communicate externally regarding training or resources for the employee. Ensure professional and clear communication in all external interactions.

External communication related to a probationary employee typically involves interactions with entities outside of the direct team or the company itself.

- **Regarding Training:**

- Managers might need to communicate with external training providers to enrol the employee in courses or workshops identified as necessary for their development.

- This communication would involve providing employee details, understanding course content and schedules, and managing logistics.
- *Example:* Contacting a software training vendor to book the employee onto an advanced Excel course.
- **Regarding Resources:**
 - This could involve liaising with external suppliers for access to specific tools, software licenses, or other resources the employee needs to perform their job.
 - Clear and professional communication is essential to ensure these resources are obtained efficiently.
 - *Example:* Contacting an external vendor to set up access credentials for a specialized industry database the employee will be using.

Key Principles for External Communication:

- **Professionalism:** Always represent the company in a professional manner in all external communications (written and verbal).
- **Clarity:** Ensure your communication is clear, concise, and easy for the external party to understand.
- **Accuracy:** Provide accurate information about the employee and the company's needs.
- **Timeliness:** Respond promptly to external inquiries and follow up as needed.
- **Authorization:** Be aware of any internal protocols or approval processes required before engaging in external communication.

4. Conducting Monthly Formal Probation Meetings

These meetings are critical for providing constructive feedback and ensuring the employee has the opportunity to succeed.

Steps for Conducting the Meeting:

1. Preparation:

Before the formal meeting, thorough preparation is crucial for a productive and meaningful discussion. **Review the employee's performance against the agreed-upon objectives and standards.**

Action: The manager should revisit the initial job description, any specific goals set for the probationary period (e.g., during onboarding or previous monthly meetings), and the expected standards of performance for the role.

Consider:

- What are the company's expectations regarding attendance and punctuality, as outlined in the employment contract or company policy?
- How does the employee's attendance record compare to these expectations?
- Has there been a pattern of "excessive sick leave" (e.g., frequent single-day absences, taking leave shortly after starting)? What is considered "excessive" according to company policy?
- How frequently has the employee been "late coming"? What is the impact of this on team operations or their ability to start work on time?
- **Example (Attendance):** "Our company policy states that while we understand occasional illness, frequent or unscheduled absences can impact team productivity. Over the past month, you have taken [number] days of sick leave. Let's discuss the reasons for this and ensure we are aligned with our policy."
- **Example (Punctuality):** "The expected start time for your role is [time]. I've noted [number] instances of you arriving late this past month. Consistent punctuality is important for team collaboration and starting your tasks effectively. Let's discuss how we can ensure you are able to arrive on time."

Gather specific examples of strengths and areas for improvement.

Action: Instead of making general statements, the manager should identify concrete instances that illustrate the employee's strengths and areas where development is needed.

How to Gather:

- Review your notes from informal weekly check-ins.
- Look at completed work, projects, or tasks.
- Consider feedback received from colleagues or clients (if relevant).
- Reflect on any challenges encountered and how the employee responded.

- **Example (Strength):** "During the X project, you demonstrated excellent problem-solving skills when you [describe the specific situation and their action]."
- **Example (Area for Improvement):** "On the Y report, the section on [specific part] lacked the level of detail required. For future reports, let's ensure we include [specific information]."

Prepare open-ended questions to encourage self-reflection.

Action: Formulate questions that prompt the employee to think critically about their own performance and progress, rather than just providing yes/no answers.

- **Examples:**
- "How do you feel you've progressed in your role over the past month?"
- "What do you think your biggest accomplishments have been since our last meeting?"
- "What aspects of your work have you found most challenging?"
- "Are there any areas where you feel you could improve or need more support?"
- "Looking ahead, what are your priorities for the next month?"

Identify potential training needs.

Action: Based on the review of performance and the identified areas for improvement, consider if any specific training, resources, or mentorship could help the employee develop.

Consider:

- Are there recurring skill gaps hindering performance?
- Did the employee express a desire to learn a new skill?
- Would a particular course or workshop address an identified development area?
- **Example:** If the employee is struggling with a specific software, identify relevant training courses. If they need to improve their presentation skills, consider a workshop on public speaking.

Document observations and examples.

Action: Keep a written record of your observations, specific examples of performance (both positive and negative), and any potential training needs identified during your preparation.

Why Document:

- Ensures you have concrete evidence to refer to during the meeting.
- Provides a basis for a fair and objective discussion.
- Helps track the employee's progress over time.
- Is important for legal compliance should any performance issues escalate.

What to Document: Dates of incidents, specific actions or outcomes, impact on team or results, and any initial thoughts on next steps.

- By thoroughly preparing using these steps, you will be well-equipped to conduct a productive and supportive monthly probation meeting.

2. The Meeting:

- **Create a Comfortable Environment:** Choose a private and neutral setting.
- **Start with Positives (Strengths):** Acknowledge the employee's contributions and successes. Be specific with examples.
 - *Example:* "I've been impressed with your proactive approach to learning the new software. Your initiative in asking questions has been beneficial."
- **Address Areas for Development (Weaknesses):** Frame these constructively as opportunities for growth. Provide specific examples and avoid generalizations.
 - *Example:* "We've noticed a few instances where deadlines were missed. Let's discuss strategies to improve time management."
- **Encourage Self-Reflection:** Ask the employee for their perspective on their performance.
 - *Example:* "How do you feel you've progressed in the last month?" or "What areas do you think you need to focus on?"
- **Collaboratively Develop an Action Plan:** Work with the employee to identify specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals for the next period.

- *Example:* "To improve your report writing, we can schedule you for the 'Effective Business Writing' workshop next month. How does that sound?"
- **Identify Training Needs:** Based on the discussion, identify any specific training or support required.
 - *Example:* "It seems further training on [specific skill] would be beneficial. Let's explore available resources."
- **Document the Discussion:** Record the key points discussed, agreed-upon action plan, and any identified training needs. Both the manager and employee should sign this record.
- **End Positively:** Reiterate your commitment to supporting their success.

5. Identifying Training Needs

During ongoing discussions and formal meetings, managers should actively identify areas where the employee could benefit from further training or development. This could be related to technical skills, soft skills, or company-specific processes.

How to Identify:

Managers should actively look for opportunities to support the employee's growth through targeted training and development.

- **Observe performance gaps.**

Action: Pay close attention to the employee's daily work, their execution of tasks, and the outcomes they achieve. Identify areas where their current skills or knowledge seem to fall short of what's required for the role or for optimal performance.

Consider:

- Are there tasks they consistently struggle with?
- Do they frequently ask for help on specific types of issues?
- Are there areas where their work doesn't meet the expected quality or efficiency?
- Do they seem hesitant or lack confidence when faced with certain responsibilities?
- **Example:** If the role requires using a specific CRM system and you observe the employee taking significantly longer than expected to update records or consistently making errors, this indicates a potential training need on that CRM system.

Listen to the employee's self-assessment.

Action: Actively solicit and pay attention to the employee's own perspective on their strengths and weaknesses, and areas where they feel they need to develop.

How to Elicit:

- Ask open-ended questions like, "Are there any aspects of your role where you feel you'd like to improve or learn more about?" or "What skills do you think would be most beneficial for you to develop in the coming months?"
- During the monthly meetings, specifically ask about their comfort level with different tasks and responsibilities.
- **Example:** The employee might say, "I feel comfortable with most aspects of customer interaction, but I'd like to improve my skills in handling difficult customer conversations." This directly points to a potential need for training in conflict resolution or advanced customer service techniques.

Review progress against objectives.

Action: Regularly compare the employee's actual performance against the goals and objectives that were set for the probationary period or for specific projects.

Consider:

- Are they on track to meet their targets?
- If not, are the shortfalls due to a lack of specific skills or knowledge?
- Are there any recurring themes in areas where progress is slower than expected?
- **Example:** If a key objective was to independently manage a certain type of project by the end of the second month, and you observe that the employee still requires significant guidance, it might indicate a need for more training or mentorship in project management skills.

Proactively suggest relevant training opportunities.

Action: Based on your understanding of the role, the employee's background, and observed performance, take the initiative to suggest training or development that could be beneficial, even if the employee hasn't explicitly asked for it.

Consider:

- Are there any upcoming internal workshops or external courses that align with the employee's role or potential development areas?
- Could mentorship from a more experienced colleague be beneficial?
- Are there online resources or learning modules that could enhance their skills?
- **Example:** You might say, "I noticed you've been working on more data analysis tasks. We have an internal workshop next month on advanced Excel functions that I think would be really valuable for you. Would you be interested in attending?"

6. Managing Probation Extension

In some cases, an employee may not have demonstrated sufficient progress during the initial probationary period, necessitating an extension.

Process for Probation Extension:

- **Timely Communication:** Discuss the need for an extension with the employee well before the initial probation period ends.
- **Clear Reasons:** Provide specific and objective reasons for the extension, linked to performance or conduct.
 - *Example:* "Due to the need for further development in [specific area], we propose extending your probation for an additional [duration] to allow more time to meet the required standards."
- **Revised Objectives:** Clearly outline the specific goals and expectations for the extended period.
- **Support and Monitoring:** Continue to provide support, feedback, and monitor progress closely during the extension.
- **Legal Compliance:** Ensure the extension is in line with company policy and fair labour practices.

7. Do's and Don'ts for Managers During Probation

Do's	Don'ts	Examples
Provide clear expectations from day one.	Make assumptions about the employee's understanding.	Clearly explain job responsibilities, performance standards, and company policies during onboarding.
Give regular and constructive feedback (both positive and negative).	Only provide feedback during the formal monthly meeting.	During the week, acknowledge good work on a project and also address a minor error promptly and constructively.

Document all formal and informal discussions and feedback.	Rely solely on memory when assessing performance.	Keep a record of key discussion points, agreed-upon actions, and any instances of concern (e.g., repeated late coming).
Be approachable and encourage open communication.	Be dismissive of employee concerns or questions.	Create an environment where the employee feels comfortable asking for help or clarification.
Focus on development and provide opportunities for improvement.	Only focus on pointing out mistakes without offering solutions.	When discussing "poor work" (e.g., errors in reports), offer training resources or mentorship opportunities.
Adhere to company policies and South African labour law.	Ignore potential issues or legal requirements.	Ensure that processes for managing leave and addressing performance align with the BCEA and LRA.
Be fair and consistent in your approach with all probationary employees.	Show favouritism or inconsistent application of standards.	Apply the same standards for attendance and performance to all new hires.
Address issues promptly.	Let minor issues escalate without intervention.	If an employee has "consistent leave and sick leave during probation months," address this early on to understand the reasons and discuss expectations. Follow company policy regarding absenteeism.
Clearly communicate the consequences of not meeting performance standards.	Surprise the employee with non-confirmation without prior warnings.	If "late coming" is a recurring issue, formally discuss the impact on the team and the expectation for punctuality, outlining potential consequences if it continues.
Actively listen to the employee's perspective.	Dominate the conversation during meetings.	Ask the employee for their input on their performance and challenges they are facing.

8. Conclusion: Fostering Success

Managing the probationary period effectively is an investment in the future success of your team and the organization. By prioritizing clear communication, adhering to legal requirements, and focusing on employee development, you can create a positive and productive onboarding experience that sets new employees up for long-term success.