



BC EXCLUDED EMPLOYEES' ASSOCIATION

MyInfo:

Discussing performance at work, whether directly related to specific jobs or to overall behavior, can elicit both discomfort and confusion. This MyInfo resource examines one mechanism that can be used to clarify expectations: a Letter of Expectations. We will cover what to expect and how we can help you achieve the best result.

Letter of Expectations

According to BCPSA HR policy and guidelines, two distinctly different mechanisms will assist you to manage performance: Letters of Expectations and Letters of Discipline. During, the last three years, we have reviewed letters sent to staff, which are called 'Letters of Expectation' but are clearly disciplinary in nature. Nevertheless, we have never once reviewed a Letter of Discipline.

Finding Out...

This is because our members are most often faced with dealing or responding to Letters of Expectation that cross the boundary into performance management—and even discipline. Our tips are given in that context.

Why?

Be honest—as supervisors we dread having “performance” conversations with our direct reports. We frequently put off or avoid dealing with performance issues, sometimes for years. When we eventually tackle the issues we often feel ill equipped. At times, this results in either taking a rigid and harsh approach or being so vague that the direct report has no real idea of what we are asking of them. When we're on the receiving end of a Letter of Expectations or of Discipline, we are often shocked: We had no idea there were issues relating to our performance. Sometimes our reaction is so “over the top” that the issue escalates with negative implications. Sound familiar?

Your Options

How We Can Help

WHAT IS A LETTER OF EXPECTATION?

A Letter of Expectations is intended to set out desired behaviour and responsibilities before disciplinary action is necessary. Unlike Letters of Discipline, which can be removed from a personnel file of union staff, Letters of Expectations remain on file. As such, they should outline expected behaviour in a way that could be addressed to any staff member.

Because employers are using Letters of Expectations for a variety of purposes (and not always intentionally!), their content can vary. On the most basic level, the letter should outline desired objectives concerning work responsibilities or behaviour. In some cases the letter is part of an ongoing process of discussion between the supervisor and staff about areas that require improvement. The letter may also serve as a serious prelude to potential disciplinary action.

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Generally speaking, a Letter of Expectations is most effective if it arrives following a one-on-one discussion about responsibilities or workplace issues. Depending on the wording, these letters can be interpreted either as part of a disciplinary process or solely as an approach to performance management. The line is often blurred. Instead of detailing differences between the two, there are some predictable givens.

RECEIVING A LETTER OF EXPECTATIONS.

Everyone reacts negatively to receiving a Letter of Expectations. Not once has the BCEEa received a phone call from a member who expressed delight over receiving such a letter! If you are the unhappy recipient of this type of correspondence and are a BCEEa member, please call us. We will review the letter with you and help you formulate productive and positive next steps. Here are some of the issues we'll discuss with you:

- 1) Is this letter a surprise or have you discussed some of these issues with your supervisor in the past?
- 2) What are the specific instances or behaviours mentioned in the letter and what do you believe is true and not true?? Do you think the letter is accurate or not?
- 3) What inferences are you drawing from receiving the letter and how accurate are they? What do you believe the intentions are of your supervisor in sending you this letter?
- 4) Do you think the letter is fair?
- 5) Once you answer those questions, we will then discuss what your goal is. Is it to correct erroneous information; is it to present a case for why the letter should be removed from your personnel file; is it to seek clarification or present your viewpoint?
- 6) Lastly, we will help you assess whether your response to receiving the letter will manage the situation down or escalate it. We will examine the implications of either option.

WRITING A LETTER OF EXPECTATIONS

As a supervisor you may find yourself in the situation of having to write a Letter of Expectations to one of your employees, likely on the advice of a Labour Relations Specialist with the BC PSA. Before you do so, consider the following. Remember, the BC PSA is here to give you advice, but ultimately, it is your responsibility to decide what is the best step to take with your employees.

- 1) The first basic questions you need to answer are: "Why am I writing this letter?" and "What do I anticipate the result will be from sending the letter?" Considering the impact such a letter has, you need to make sure the outcome is worth the risk of a negative reaction. Also, the letter ought to be part of a longer-term conversation that has taken place between you and the recipient. Only in very unusual circumstances would you write this type of letter without first having one-on-one discussions with the employee about your expectations and their performance or behaviour.
- 2) Have you put the letter in a context? ("Following our discussions, this is to clarify my expectations of you while you working on this temporary assignment, or failure to meet these standards may result in disciplinary process etc.")
- 3) When you review your first draft of the letter are you being clear about the difference between the facts (the observable behaviour or measurable performance) and your conclusions or assumptions about those facts?
- 4) Realistically, what do you expect to be the outcome? Is this the result that you want or is it helpful? If not, consider a different approach.
- 5) Is the final letter something that you could give to any employee in your unit, in terms of clarifying expectations? If not, it may have crossed the line into a disciplinary letter.

HOW DOES THIS ALL HAPPEN?

In some situations, the letter is handed to the employee in a meeting. When the issues in the letter are known or anticipated to be contentious, I have seen supervisors hand the letter to the employee and then go through it item by item. Needless to say, this is almost entirely wasted time due to the highly charged reaction people have to receiving such a letter. The recipient sits there reeling and not taking much in while the supervisor, with the best of intentions, laboriously reviews the letter point by point to "ensure that the employee understands the contents." A quick look at any research literature related

to difficult conversations will clarify that this approach is not helpful and can be very damaging as the employee can easily overreact due to their emotional state.

As a supervisor, if you are contemplating a meeting to deliver the letter, you will want to be very realistic about what you can accomplish. For example, the most I would recommend is that you put the letter in a context: "We've met a number of times on the topic of your lack of availability to staff. I've thought it best at this time to outline my expectations in a letter. (Outline next steps). I will give you a couple of days to review the letter and then I'd like to meet to answer any questions and to clarify any issues you may have." Then, set a future meeting date and finish with "Is there anything you need to know from me right now?" During the follow-up meeting, be prepared to give specific examples (evidence, observed behaviors) and explain how you came to your conclusions about the employee.

If you are the recipient of a letter of expectations and are called into a meeting, it is important to remember that your strong emotional reaction will diminish and that "speaking your mind" while you are in this heightened state might, in fact, not be your mind at all but a knee jerk (albeit very natural) reaction to feeling under threat. If your supervisor insists on going through the letter in detail, it is perfectly acceptable to listen and then explain that you had some trouble taking it all in and that you require a day to read the letter and absorb its contents and before meeting again. During that intervening time, call us. We will help you step back from the emotion and take a hard look at the letter so that you understand your situation clearly. It is very important for your relationship with your supervisor and your future work possibilities that you have a clear picture of what the supervisor's concerns are and how they came to their conclusions or assumptions about your behaviour. Only then can you clear up any misunderstandings, begin to tackle the issues, make improvements or plan concrete next steps.

Once you have a clear picture of your situation and have made an honest assessment of your own behaviour or performance, there are a series of actions you can take. If you disagree with the letter and believe it to be unfair or if there are extenuating circumstances, we can help you write a letter of response, which will be attached to the letter of expectations in your file. We can also help you word a request for the letter to be in your file until a specific end date or ask that it be removed completely based on a strong rationale. You may agree with part of the letter, or with the observed behaviors mentioned, but not with the conclusions drawn. You may wish to clarify both in the follow-up meeting and in a letter.

The most productive way to look at a letter of expectations situation as a recipient is this: A supervisor has outlined a set of expectations, either because a job has changed or because they have concerns about my performance or behavior. Despite the fact that I may disagree with them, it is critical that I completely understand their thinking and their concerns. Only then can I make the necessary improvements or adjustments or tackle what I believe to be an erroneous judgment.

No matter what the situation is and whether you are the supervisor or recipient, a letter of expectations is a challenging experience. Give us a call—we've dealt with this in a variety of circumstances and can help you navigate these rocky waters.

Please remember that this MyInfo sheet has been developed to provide general tips and does not take into account any individual circumstances, constitute legal advice or replace a personal consultation.