



WORKFORCE CONVERSATION GUIDE: A PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SELF-ASSESSMENT

Agency goals can only be met through successful individual and team performance. Performance management is a coordinated process through which expectations are defined, performance is measured, and improvement strategies are implemented across roles and functions. When done well, performance management aligns the workforce with agency goals, equips staff to meet expectations, and fosters continuous growth and accountability. It creates the conditions for delivering high-quality services by providing the structure needed to monitor results, surface challenges, and guide continuous improvement. Without strong performance management, agencies face greater challenges in ensuring staff effectiveness, service quality, and positive outcomes for children and families

WHAT IS PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT?

Performance management is an ongoing, strategic process that supports effective practice at the individual, team, and agency levels. It involves setting clear expectations, ensuring staff have the resources and support needed to meet them, and using data to monitor performance and guide improvement. Through day-to-day supervision, structured feedback, and formal evaluations, agencies can reinforce strengths, address performance concerns, and align staff efforts with agency goals. When done well, performance management also includes timely intervention when expectations are not met and system-level processes that help ensure high-quality, accountable services for children and families.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN THE AGENCY PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SELF-ASSESSMENT?

This review should be conducted by a [workforce team](#). An effective self-assessment of performance management processes requires input from individuals across multiple organizational levels who bring different perspectives and expertise. This should include those who directly complete performance evaluation tools (e.g., supervisors and managers), those who are being evaluated (e.g., client-facing child welfare workers), and those in leadership positions who can identify patterns, consistencies, and inconsistencies across the organization.



USING THE WORKFORCE CONVERSATION GUIDE

Workforce challenges are common, but it can be difficult to pinpoint which aspects of the employee lifecycle provide the greatest opportunity for improvement.

This resource is designed as a starting point to dive into your data and understand where you can strengthen your workforce. These workforce conversation guides address topics related to recruitment, performance, and well-being. Each one provides a list of questions intended to prompt your workforce team to consider what they know, what information is missing, identify possible trends, and question what the data mean.

These resources are designed to help you assess your needs. It is recommended that you work through each one, as workforce challenges are interconnected (see [Key Takeaways from Phases of the Child Welfare Employee Lifecycle](#)). For example, your retention problem may be directly linked to your recruitment sources. We encourage you to pull together a team, meet regularly to work through the questions, and ask yourselves “why” you are doing something in a particular way. The amount of time this process takes varies, but at the end of it, you should be able to identify where to invest your time and resources.

The assessment team should include:

- Human Resources (HR) managers
- child welfare agency leaders
- child welfare caseworkers/social workers
- child welfare information system developers or analysts
- training managers
- HR analytics staff
- Quality Assurance (QA) or Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) staff
- union representatives

External workforce experts can also provide a valuable perspective and greater knowledge of the research on performance management to prompt additional questions.

WHAT SHOULD WE LOOK AT?

Gather information from the following sources:

- Performance management and QA/CQI policies and procedures
- Performance expectations and how they were derived
- Performance review forms and supporting materials
- Performance data (e.g., from performance reviews, child welfare information systems, case reviews or audits)
- Relevant supervisor trainings
- Professional development plans
- Performance management software/HR information system tools
- Disciplinary processes and records
- Employee feedback (e.g., from surveys, interviews, focus groups) on:
 - performance expectations
 - resources
 - CQI processes
 - supervision
 - performance reviews
 - disciplinary processes

After information is gathered, the team should be thoughtful about where it is stored and how it is shared to ensure individual employee information is protected.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD WE EXPLORE?

Performance expectations and resources

- Are performance expectations established and communicated for each role in your organization? Do standards exist for both core job duties and for behaviors that support a positive and effective work environment, such as collaboration and professionalism?
- Are the performance expectations reliably and clearly communicated to everyone who needs to know them? Can they be readily accessed when needed? If not, consider what steps can be taken to ensure expectations are communicated consistently and made easily accessible to all relevant staff.

- How well do employees' current competencies align with performance expectations, including those needed to effectively plan and prioritize work? What gaps or strengths exist in the skill sets needed for effective performance?
- Do employees have a reasonable workload that makes performance expectations achievable? If not, consider the adjustments that can be made to address workload concerns and ensure performance expectations are realistic and achievable.
- How do existing resources align with what employees need to meet performance expectations?
- Are there barriers or friction points that may be impeding employee performance? If so, identify and discuss those barriers.
- Has employee input been gathered to determine how to streamline work processes? What opportunities exist to better leverage employee insights for improving efficiency and effectiveness?
- Do current work processes and information management systems support or hinder performance? Consider aspects like built-in validations, logic checks, dashboards, mobile accessibility, automated reminders, task tracking capabilities, and electronic signature functionality.

CQI

The questions below are intended to highlight key topics for your workforce team to consider as you process how workforce data is used to inform decisions.

- Does the agency foster a culture of continuous improvement that supports learning and growth?
- Are there formal CQI processes in place that assess and address performance trends across the agency?
- Are there agency staff that are specifically assigned to lead or support CQI functions?
- Are there readily accessible reports or dashboards for leaders, managers, and supervisors to monitor trends and individual performance? Are these tools perceived as useful?
- Are there readily accessible reports or dashboards for case managers to monitor their own performance? Are these tools perceived as useful?
- Do leaders, managers, and supervisors use performance data to guide their management strategies?
- Do performance data include both quantitative and qualitative data, to provide a more comprehensive and accurate picture performance?
- Are performance data used in a constructive versus punitive manner? Is there a focus on quality improvement and not just compliance? How does your organization approach the planning and implementation of change initiatives? Is sufficient planning and support provided to ensure staff are prepared to adopt and sustain new ways of working?



Supervision

The following questions address the supports available for supervisors and are intended to inform a discussion about how supervisors provide feedback and guidance in your agency.

- Do supervisors have the competencies to facilitate effective performance management?
- Do supervisors provide both clinical and supportive supervision, to address case practice improvement, professional development, and emotional support needs of staff?
- Do supervisors have the resources, tools, and information to monitor performance of the people they supervise? Do they make time to directly observe performance in action, versus just relying on records and staff self-report?
- Do supervisors provide proactive supervisory consultation to their staff through regularly planned meetings? Are supervisors readily available for emergency consultation when needed?
- Do supervisors provide timely, specific, and constructive guidance and feedback that supports learning and growth?
- Do supervisors apply performance expectations fairly and consistently, making reasonable accommodations when needed without favoritism?
- Are high-performing staff recognized formally and informally to reinforce effective performance and motivate excellence?
- Do regular performance conversations with staff occur throughout the year help prevent unexpected feedback during formal review processes?

Formal performance reviews

Most agencies have a standardized process for performance reviews. The questions below can help your team consider how well informed your supervisors and team members are about the process, and the quality and reliability of the process.



- Is there a standardized process for formal performance reviews?
- Do supervisors receive training on the process? Is there written guidance and/or other support materials on the process?
- Is the process clearly communicated to all employees?
- Is the performance review tool aligned with the functions and expectations of each job, avoiding overly generic or inapplicable criteria?
- Are formal performance reviews based on multiple sources of performance information from across the full review period?
- Are performance reviews implemented fairly and consistently?
- Do performance reviews involve two-way dialogue focused on goals, strengths, professional development, and action-oriented next steps?
- Do performance ratings accurately differentiate levels of performance across staff, rather than defaulting to uniformly high or average ratings?
- Are formal performance reviews used as an opportunity to celebrate accomplishments?
- Are performance review data analyzed to identify performance trends that can be proactively addressed?

Discipline

Similar to understanding how your agency uses performance review data, the following questions focus on poor performance and discipline. Reviewing your policies and practices in collaboration with HR can help your workforce team think through important aspects of this process.

- Is there an established processes for addressing poor performance issues?

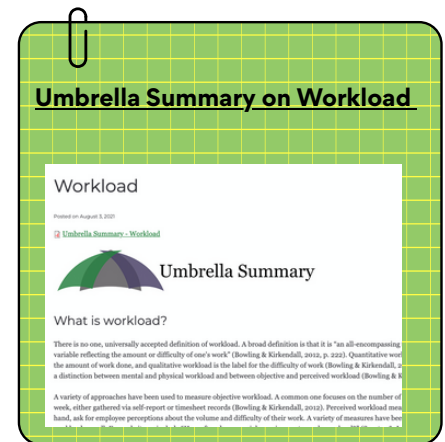
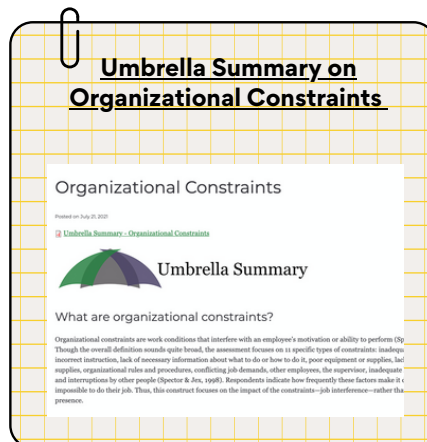
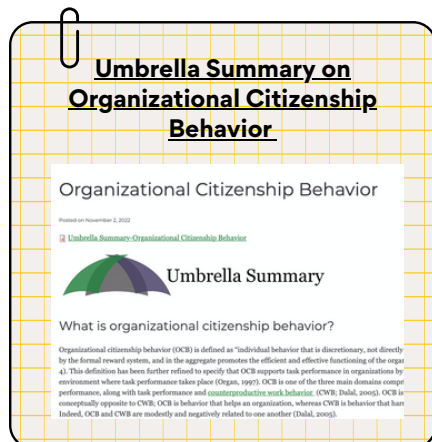


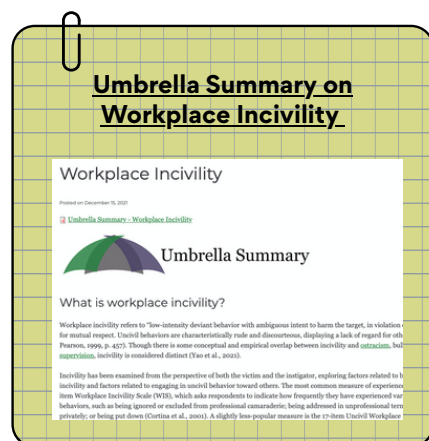
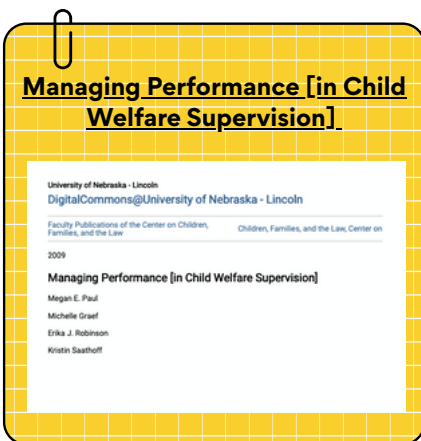
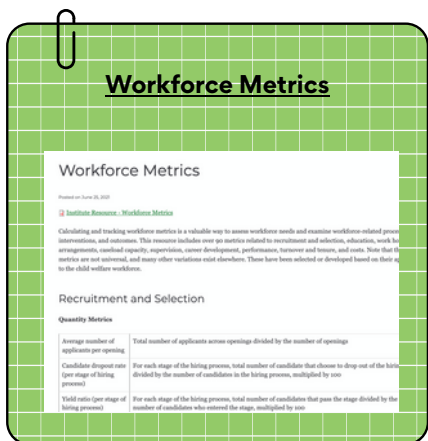
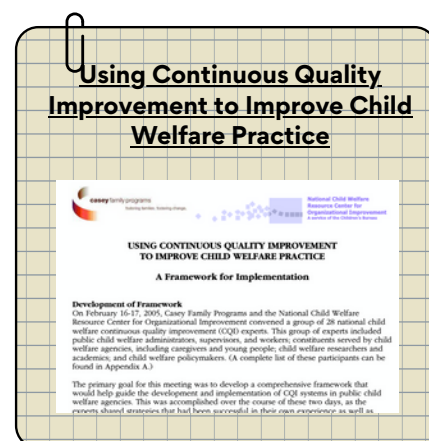
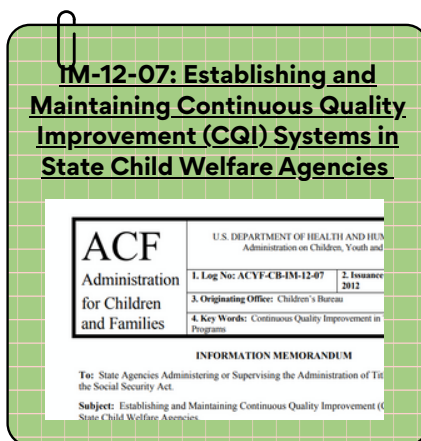
- o Does the process incorporate the principles of progressive discipline (i.e., a progression of steps that use the least severe action to correct performance after providing a reasonable opportunity to do so)?
- o Does the process involve open communication and comprehensive documentation?

- Is the disciplinary process fair, transparent, consistently applied, and compliant with legal standards? If not, discuss the real or perceived challenges.
- Are supervisors thoroughly trained in the process? How consistently do supervisors follow established disciplinary processes?
- Are staff informed about the disciplinary process and the consequences of not meeting performance expectations? How clear is the information they receive?
- Are disciplinary data analyzed to identify performance trends that can be proactively addressed? If not, how can this be accomplished?

WHAT ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE?

Digging deep into your data is not a simple task. These guiding questions, many of which are dichotomous, will likely lead to more questions or prompt team members to want to learn more about performance management. Below are a few curated resources to support your team. (Please note that no team member is expected to be an expert in these workforce topics and that bringing in an external consultant to help work through this process can be a significant benefit to any workforce team.)





WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Congratulations on examining your performance management practices. Gathering information about performance management is just one step in the process of examining agency workforce information to strengthen the workforce. You may work through the questions above and identify one or a few areas for further consideration. For example, your team may realize that performance expectations are not clearly communicated to everyone who needs to know them and additional work may be done through supervision. Once you have clarity around one or more issues that need to be addressed you can dig deeper into a specific aspect of performance management to develop targeted solutions. The results of the team's assessment may be shared with a management team, to get their reactions to and interpretations of your findings. Management may also need to identify available resources (e.g., time, money, and people) before moving on to select (or create) a workforce intervention or analytics tools to help address and track the challenge.

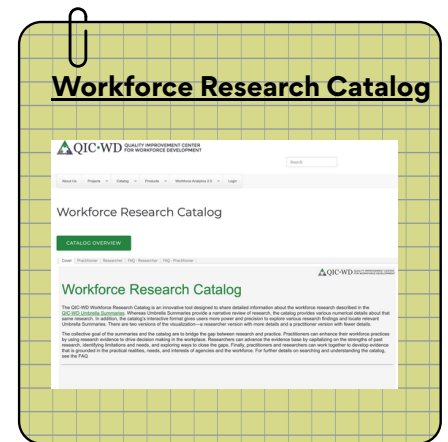
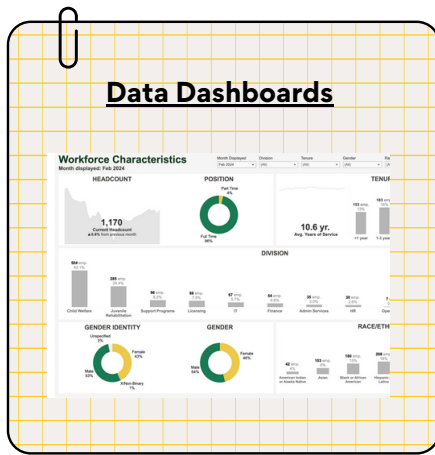
As agency needs and the broader environment shift over time, your organization must be responsive to those changes. This exercise should be repeated every few years, especially if there are concerns about the performance management process. Regular assessment ensures that your processes remain relevant, fair, and effective in supporting both individual growth and organizational outcomes. As you implement changes based on this assessment, continue to monitor their impact and gather feedback from staff at all levels.

REFERENCES & RESOURCES

Data visualization tools, such as [dashboards](#), can help workforce teams identify trends and monitor workforce characteristics or key outcomes in real time.

The [Workforce App](#) (embedded under the “See for Yourself” header) to input basic workforce data and see visualizations related to turnover & tenure, recruitment & selection, work hours, and career development

Use the Practitioner View of the [Workforce Research Catalog](#) to learn more about the association between common workforce outcomes (e.g., burnout, stress, turnover) and the variables that predict them.



The Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Analytics was supported by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the United States (U.S.) Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$1,468,634 with 100 percent funded by ACF/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by ACF/HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit the ACF website, Administrative and National Policy Requirements.