



**DARLINGTON**  
Borough Council

# Managers Guide to On Track Talks (OTT)

**Human Resources, Operations Group**

## ON TRACK TALK GUIDANCE

### INTRODUCTION

Building relationships and trust takes effort, you should make an extra effort to connect and get to know your employees. Different employees have different preferences and expectations; understanding those preferences will help every employee reach their full productive potential.

Holding regular one-on-one meetings will allow you to create a connection with your team and is especially important when leading a remote team. How often you hold these meetings will depend on everyone's availability and the preference and experience level of your employees. Most commonly, these meetings are held weekly or bi-weekly and sometimes monthly. Outputs of these meetings will also provide evidence to support your individual 'My Journey' discussions.

This guidance offers some **recommendations** in setting direction and having check ins with individuals and groups to ensure they're feeling OK, their performance is on track, and they are living our values of Respect, Collaboration, Innovation and Deliver.

We know that there are many areas of good practice already within our council, so if you (the manager) already have an embedded practice that keeps you informed of your teams welfare, performance and progress, that's ok and we only suggest you consider the guidance and template examples to compare and see if this could improve your practice.

This guidance can be read in conjunction with the 'Meeting and Developing People Our Way' document.

### WHY?

It's important that managers stay connected to check in on key aspects of employee's wellbeing, performance and support or recognition where needed. These catch ups should also help to give clarity on direction by assigning targets (or goals) and SMART tasks and objectives.

### WHO?

We have a diverse workforce, with a wide range of roles so while there is no set way of how, when or what with these On Track Talks it is important thing is that our employees all have the opportunity to discuss their wellbeing, any support needed and have clarity around their tasks, targets and objectives.

### HOW?

These catch ups should be relaxed but focussed. Depending on the role, purpose and reporting structure, there are many ways this could be carried out including:

- Individual meetings, often referred to as One to Ones.
- Team/group meetings
- Project meetings
- Day to day interactions

**Refer to the 'Managers Guide in Having Quality Conversation' for tips to setting the tone and having those quality conversations.**

## **WHEN?**

For the above reasons it's important to keep in touch, however the frequency and approach will depend on many things. We share accountability for making sure that we have at least 6 on track conversations every year. That's about one every 8 weeks – but that doesn't mean you can't have more! It's not solely the managers responsibility to make this happen. Every employee has the right to have quality time with their manager.

More regular conversations would be expected where support was identified, and performance was a concern.

## **WHERE?**

Although in-person meetings will provide the best way for everyone to engage, and communicate effectively by understanding body language, we appreciate that this is not always essential and for some purposes, meeting remotely will be better than not meeting at all.

## **WHAT?**

On Track Talks should concentrate on employee's targets, objectives, the ways they work and their wellbeing. These are different to 'My Journey' conversations which focus on the employee's personal career aspirations, succession planning and development need.

The quality of the conversation will be directly proportionate to the effort that you put in and it goes without saying that the conversation will involve:

- ✓ **Checking in on the employee's wellbeing,**
- ✓ **Reviewing performance/behaviours and**
- ✓ **Agreeing objectives, tasks and targets (reviewing, changing or adding to these when needed).**

How these meetings are carried out are up to you, but what is important is that these meetings offer clarity and support by documenting any outcomes/actions to provide clear instructions for what happens next

### **Checking in on employees Wellbeing**

Promoting and supporting employee wellbeing is at the heart of our purpose to champion better work and working lives because a healthy and effective workplace can deliver mutual benefit to employees, our council, economy, and communities. Healthy workplaces help employees to flourish and reach their potential and can lead to increased resilience, better employee engagement, reduced sickness absence and higher performance and productivity. However, wellbeing initiatives often fall short of their potential because they stand alone, isolated from the everyday business. To gain real benefit, employee wellbeing priorities must be integrated in everything we do day to day and during the On Track process.

Whether in a group setting or an individual meeting wellbeing should be discussed, a simple 'How are you?' or 'How has/have your week/few weeks/month been?' to start the discussion.

Other wellbeing questions will depend on whether you are noticing differences in the employee and probing to see if you can support or are aware of the background and monitoring how they are doing, e.g.:

- I've noticed you haven't been yourself recently, is there anything you would like to talk about?
- On a scale 1-10 (being fantastic) how do you feel? How could we increase this rating?
- Is there anything I could do to support you? (Consider referrals to Occupational Health, Counselling or Physiotherapy)
- Do you have anything else you would like to share?
- How are you feeling at the moment?
- Is there anything on your mind that we haven't talked about?

The manager should have knowledge of the support services available within the Council to discuss with the employee, where applicable.

### **Reviewing Performance/behaviours**

Positive feedback isn't just about kind words. It reaffirms that we're having an impact — that our efforts are paying off. It's inspiring, motivating, and it shows us where to focus our efforts in the future. Giving positive feedback at work means telling someone they did a good job, exceeded expectations, or produced great results — that they exhibited good workplace behaviour. By letting team members know when they've done well, you encourage more of that desired behaviour and those good results in the future.

It is just as important to discuss what is not going so well, any performance or behavioural concerns should be talked through, focusing on the performance and facts not personalities and most importantly discussing support asking 'Is there any more support you need? Are you getting what you need from me? Can we put a plan together to move forward?'

Remember, don't just talk about the '**what**', reflect on the '**how**' too using our Valued Behaviours Framework, which you'll find [here](#) [web page]. Our [Valued Behaviours](#) describe the attitude and approach we should all take towards our work and how we represent the Council even when we're not working.

Where it's believed that the employee isn't demonstrating the council values, speak to your HR contact for advice and guidance on how to use the behaviour framework to improve the individual's performance.

### **Setting and reviewing Tasks, Targets and Objectives**

When meeting managers and employees should discuss goals and agree objectives. These objectives should naturally flow from Service Plans and functional operational plans reflecting on how the employee can contribute in line with their job role. At the end of the catch up everyone should be clear about what needs to be delivered and when – with the right balance between realistic and challenging objectives. Ideally, not more than six objectives.

**What is the difference between Tasks and Objectives?** Objectives describe what you will ultimately achieve. Tasks are the key actions that show how you will achieve it.

**What is the difference between targets and objectives?** A target (or goal) refers to the desired outcome. An objective is a measurable milestone that refers to specific actions to achieve the target (or goal).

**What are Targets?**

Target setting is more commonly referred to as key performance indicators (KPIs) or outputs and are usually clear at an organisational level, but it is often less clear what good performance constitutes for individuals or teams. Performance measures in some jobs are straightforward, as the outcomes are obvious and objective. But for many roles– it is more complicated to measure performance.

At the Council we cascade departmental targets or goals through our Service Plans and the On Track process will inform and guide the expectations for employees and teams. It may be helpful to think of three main types of performance when setting and monitoring targets:

- **Task performance:** how well someone carries out the core activities included in their job. This could include the number of customer satisfaction ratings, specific cases resolved, time it takes to complete an activity i.e. employee recruitment stages, service quality or (for people managers) their impact on the people in their team.
- **Demonstrating our Valued behaviours:** for example, helping other teams reach their targets, or contributing to ad hoc initiatives and showing respect.
- **Adaptive performance:** how well employees respond to changing job demands or support innovation. This includes both how agile employees are to changing objectives and how they help the organisation become more agile in response to demands.

All three types can all be understood as results (the outcomes of activity) or as behaviour (how that activity was carried out).

**What are Objectives?**

This is where the employee receives clarity on what they need to do to deliver their targets.

**Objectives should always be SMART:**

S	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>SPECIFIC</b></li> <li>• Include the details of what the individual or group wants to achieve with the target/task/objective.</li> </ul>
M	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>MEASURABLE</b></li> <li>• You should be able to measure your progress and accurately determine whether the target/task/objective has been achieved.</li> </ul>
A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>ACHIEVEABLE</b></li> <li>• the target/task/objective should be challenging not too easy and not too hard, they should motivate the individual or group. Clear ownership and due dates should be given.</li> </ul>
R	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>REALISTIC</b></li> <li>• Include the details of what the individual or group want to achieve the target/task/objective should be reachable with effort and resources available. Ensure they reflect the overall DBC objectives.</li> </ul>
T	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>TIMELY</b></li> <li>• The target/task/objective should have defined start and end dates or if they are long term projects set out incremental tasks and dates to meet specific</li> </ul>

Agreeing personal objectives is a two-way process, but managers must ensure that an appropriate number and range of objectives are set, which contribute to departmental and Council goals.

Both the employee and the manager should bring proposals for discussion to the conversation, this is dedicated time to talk, where you have each other's undivided attention so make the best use of the time, preparation is the key.

Some guidance would be:

- Ideally, no employee should have more than six personal objectives at any one time.
- These should be listed in order of priority.
- Some roles will have less than six personal objectives.
- Objectives should also focus on the 'way' in which work is completed; namely the quality of the outcome and the behaviour and attitudes of the individual in carrying it out.
- Objectives may also include personal development goals and the attainment of competencies or skills.
- Training is not an objective! If training is agreed as required, it should be recorded as a learning and development need and picked up in 'My Journey' process.

### **Follow up**

Ensure that there is a record of any plans and actions agreed in the meeting and schedule the next on track talk.