

Performance, Feedback, and Growth

Executive Summary

Effective performance management is crucial for NGOs to maximize their mission impact by developing and retaining talented staff. Yet many nonprofits struggle with outdated, infrequent appraisal processes that fail to motivate employees. In one survey, two-thirds of nonprofits rated their performance assessment approach as a weakness ¹. Traditional annual reviews are often seen as “soul-crushing” and politicized, delivering little value – only 13% of leaders and employees rate their review process as useful ², and a mere 14% of employees strongly agree that performance appraisals inspire them to improve ³. A key challenge is the sector’s well-intentioned “caring culture”: nonprofits focus on the greater good and may avoid tough feedback, making it hard to differentiate and elevate performance ⁴. The result is missed opportunities for growth, biased evaluations, and disengaged staff.

Research and emerging best practices point to a better approach. Progressive organizations are shifting from punitive annual appraisals to a **continuous, development-focused** model ⁵. This model emphasizes ongoing coaching, timely feedback, and aligning individual goals with the NGO’s mission. Evidence shows that regular feedback dramatically boosts engagement and performance – 80% of employees who received meaningful feedback in the past week are fully engaged at work ⁶. Employees are **3.6× more likely** to be motivated to do outstanding work when their manager provides daily (vs. annual) feedback ⁷. At the same time, providing growth opportunities is critical: retention rates are up to 34% higher when organizations invest in employee development, and **94% of workers say** they would stay longer if their employer invested in their learning ⁸. Especially in mission-driven NGOs where salary budgets are limited, investing in staff development and feedback pays off in loyalty and capacity.

This guide presents an evidence-based framework for NGOs to build a performance management culture centered on continuous feedback, fairness, and growth. We outline step-by-step how to set clear expectations linked to mission, foster an ongoing feedback culture, conduct constructive reviews, and create development plans. We include practical tools (e.g. goal-setting templates, feedback models, development plan samples) and two case vignettes of NGOs that improved performance practices. We also identify key metrics (like engagement and turnover rates) to track progress, and discuss risks (such as bias or poor implementation) with strategies to mitigate them. The goal is to help NGOs create a **transparent, supportive performance management system** where employees receive regular, meaningful feedback, develop their skills, and feel empowered to achieve both their personal growth and the organization’s mission. In short, effective performance, feedback, and growth practices will drive higher staff engagement, improve program outcomes, and strengthen the NGO’s talent pipeline for future leaders ⁹.

Evidence Table (Key Findings | Strength | NGO Implications)

Key Finding	Strength of Evidence	Implications for NGOs
<p>Continuous feedback boosts engagement and performance. Employees who receive frequent, meaningful feedback show dramatically higher engagement and motivation (e.g. 80% of those getting feedback <i>weekly</i> are fully engaged ⁶ ; managers giving <i>daily</i> feedback see employees 3.6× more likely to be motivated vs. annual feedback ⁷).</p>	<p>Strong (large-scale Gallup surveys)</p>	<p>Make real-time feedback part of the culture. Train managers to give regular, constructive feedback and encourage two-way communication. Even resource-constrained NGOs can schedule brief check-ins to keep staff engaged and on track.</p>
<p>Annual appraisals alone often fail to improve performance. Traditional yearly reviews are widely seen as ineffective or even harmful. Only 13–14% of employees and leaders believe their performance review process is useful or inspiring ² ³ . Infrequent reviews create high stakes and anxiety, often emphasizing evaluation over improvement.</p>	<p>Moderate (consistent survey data)</p>	<p>Relying on once-a-year evaluations can undermine morale and development. NGOs should shift from an “audit” mindset to a continuous development approach – supplementing periodic reviews with ongoing coaching so performance management is an ongoing, low-stress dialogue.</p>
<p>Clear, challenging goals improve performance – if aligned well. Over 1,000 studies show that setting specific, difficult goals significantly increases task performance, persistence, and motivation compared to vague or easy goals ¹⁰ . However, goals must be realistic and mission-aligned: research warns that poorly designed goals can narrow focus too much or encourage unethical behavior (e.g. overly aggressive targets prompting bad practices) ¹¹ .</p>	<p>Strong (extensive research on goal-setting; some evidence of downsides)</p>	<p>Define SMART goals for each employee that link to the NGO’s mission and values. Challenging targets push performance, but ensure they are attainable and coupled with ethical guidelines. Monitor goal effects – if negative behaviors or stress emerge, adjust goals and emphasize learning over sheer targets.</p>

Key Finding	Strength of Evidence	Implications for NGOs
<p>Investing in staff growth increases retention and engagement. Employees highly value development: 86% would consider switching jobs for more learning opportunities ¹² . Organizations offering strong development see significantly higher retention (94% of workers would stay longer if their employer invested in their growth ⁸). Nonprofits often report weakness in this area (80%+ of NGOs rated their ability to provide growth opportunities as poor ¹³).</p>	<p>Strong (multiple surveys across sectors)</p>	<p>Prioritize learning and development as part of performance management. Even with limited budgets, NGOs can offer stretch assignments, mentorship, training, and career pathways. Emphasize growth conversations in reviews. Demonstrating a commitment to employees' professional growth will improve loyalty and reduce turnover – a critical benefit for NGOs that rely on experienced, mission-committed staff.</p>
<p>Bias in feedback and evaluations is a serious risk. Studies find systemic gender and racial biases in performance feedback. In one 2024 analysis of 23,000 reviews, 78% of women were described as “emotional” (versus just 11% of men), and 56% of women were labeled “unlikable,” reflecting subjective critiques ¹⁴ . White and Asian men were far more likely to be praised as “intelligent” or receive actionable feedback, whereas over 60% of Black and Latino employees were labeled “emotional” in reviews ¹⁵ .</p>	<p>Strong (large-sample text analysis)</p>	<p>NGOs must ensure fairness and objectivity in performance assessments. Use structured criteria and rubrics tied to concrete behaviors and mission values (to limit subjectivity). Provide unconscious bias training for managers and consider 360° feedback (multi-source input) to dilute individual bias. Emphasizing core values and evidence-based examples in reviews helps create a more equitable feedback process, aligning with NGO principles of inclusion.</p>

Key Finding	Strength of Evidence	Implications for NGOs
<p>Hybrid performance management (ongoing feedback + periodic reviews) outperforms either alone. High-performing HR teams tend to combine continuous feedback with structured reviews. One 2023 industry report found top organizations conduct more frequent review cycles and leverage feedback from multiple sources (managers, peers, recognition) rather than relying solely on an annual manager review ¹⁶. Completely eliminating formal reviews or ratings without replacement can backfire – studies show employee performance dropped ~10% at companies that removed performance ratings, due to lack of clarity and accountability ¹⁷.</p>	<p>Moderate (industry benchmarking and organizational case studies)</p>	<p>Blend regular informal feedback with formal checkpoints. NGOs should implement an ongoing feedback culture <i>and</i> maintain periodic reviews (e.g. mid-year and annual) to formally document progress and align on goals. This hybrid approach ensures continuous improvement while still providing structure for compensation, promotion, or remedial decisions. If traditional rating scales are removed, replace them with clear qualitative evaluations and coaching so employees still understand how they're doing.</p>

Step-by-Step Framework

Implementing a robust performance, feedback, and growth system in an NGO involves several clear steps. Below is a step-by-step framework to establish a continuous performance management cycle:

- 1. Align Goals with Mission and Expectations:** Begin by setting clear performance expectations for each role that tie into the NGO's mission and strategic objectives. Work with each employee to establish SMART goals (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) or OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) that define what success looks like. **Make the mission the touchstone** – employees should see how their individual goals contribute to program outcomes or community impact ¹⁸ ¹⁹. For example, a program officer's goals might include not only activity targets but also how those efforts advance the NGO's core values or strategic priorities. Ensure expectations are documented (e.g. through job descriptions and goal plans) and **crystal-clear** to the employee ²⁰ ²¹. Clarity and line-of-sight to the mission increase employees' sense of purpose and accountability.
- 2. Train Managers and Foster a Feedback Culture:** Equip your managers and team leaders with the skills and mindset to provide constructive feedback and coach their teams. Many nonprofits find that line managers need support to confidently evaluate and discuss performance ²² ²³. Conduct training on topics like how to set goals, how to observe and document performance, and how to have difficult conversations with sensitivity. Emphasize that performance management is **not just an HR task but a leadership responsibility at all levels**. Secure leadership buy-in to model the desired culture – when senior leaders openly discuss goals, solicit feedback, and admit mistakes, it normalizes a growth mindset for everyone. It's also important to communicate to all staff that feedback (positive and negative) is a normal and healthy part of work, not a punitive exercise. Encourage a shift from viewing appraisals as **"discipline or punishment"** to seeing feedback as a continuous, two-way dialogue aimed at learning ²⁴. This may involve overcoming cultural barriers

in some regions or teams; adapt training to acknowledge local norms and stress shared values of respect and improvement. By investing upfront in manager capability and setting a positive tone, NGOs create psychological safety for employees to receive and give feedback without fear.

3. **Establish Regular Check-Ins and Ongoing Feedback:** Don't wait for an annual review to discuss performance. Schedule frequent one-on-one check-ins (e.g. monthly or quarterly) between managers and employees to review progress on goals, provide real-time feedback, and course-correct as needed. These conversations should be informal and coaching-oriented. Gallup recommends making feedback **"fast and frequent"** – for most roles, brief conversations a few times per week or at least monthly can dramatically improve engagement ²⁵ ²⁶ . In practice, a check-in could be a 30-minute monthly meeting where the manager and employee each share updates: what's going well, where are there challenges, and what support or development is needed. **Document key points** or action items from these talks (many organizations use a simple one-on-one form or shared notes) so there's continuity. Additionally, foster peer feedback and recognition outside the manager relationship – for example, team members might periodically share "Stop, Start, Continue" feedback with each other, or use a kudos system to praise good work. The goal is to make feedback timely and normal: when a field officer completes a project report, their supervisor might give pointers the next day on improving clarity rather than waiting months. By addressing issues or celebrating wins in real time, employees can immediately apply the input while it's fresh (eliminating the **recency bias** and memory gaps that plague annual reviews) ²⁷ ²⁸ . Managers should balance constructive feedback with positive recognition, and ensure feedback is specific – citing examples and results, not personal traits ²⁹ ³⁰ . Over time, these habits create a supportive coaching environment where no one is surprised by their formal review feedback because they've been hearing it (and acting on it) all along.
4. **Conduct Periodic Performance Reviews (Focus on Development):** While continuous feedback is critical, it should be complemented by more formal, periodic reviews to take stock of overall performance. Many NGOs find a **mid-year and annual review** cycle works well. The mid-year check can be relatively light – a chance to formally recap progress, update goals, and address any emerging issues. The **annual performance review** remains important as a summative evaluation **and** a forward-looking discussion about growth. To make formal reviews effective, avoid the common pitfalls of traditional appraisals. Use a standardized evaluation form that covers multiple dimensions: achievement of objectives, demonstration of organizational values/competencies, and areas for improvement. For instance, a review form might rate goal attainment and also include narrative feedback on how the person contributed to teamwork or innovation. Incorporating the NGO's core values into the review criteria can reinforce an ethical, mission-driven focus (Teach For America, for example, ties individual evaluations to how staff embody core values in their work) ¹⁸ ³¹ . **Gather input from multiple sources** if possible: some NGOs implement 360-degree feedback, where peers, direct reports (for managers), and partners can provide feedback that the manager considers in the review. This can provide a fuller picture and reduce bias or blind spots. Ensure the employee also conducts a self-assessment – reflecting on their own achievements and challenges – which is shared in advance. During the review meeting, encourage an open conversation: the manager should summarize feedback and ratings (no surprises, ideally), then pivot to a coaching discussion about future goals and development. Keep the tone forward-looking and constructive: even when documenting underperformance, frame the conversation around problem-solving and support (e.g. "Let's identify what will help you improve these outcomes"). It may be helpful to **decouple the performance review from immediate pay or promotion decisions** – or at least

separate them by a time gap – so that the employee can focus on honest reflection without the conversation being solely about a salary verdict ³² ³³ . Many experts suggest holding a development-focused review discussion first, then a compensation discussion a few weeks later, to reduce tension ³⁴ ³⁵ . By making formal reviews fair, consistent, and growth-oriented, NGOs can extract value from them rather than dread.

5. Create Individual Development Plans (IDPs): A key outcome of the performance review discussion should be a concrete plan for the employee's growth. Performance management and professional development should be two sides of the same coin – every employee, including high performers, can have a development plan. After discussing strengths and areas for improvement, work together to identify 2–3 development goals for the next period. These could involve **training** (e.g. a course to build skills), **stretch assignments** (e.g. leading a new initiative to develop leadership skills), **mentorship or coaching** (pairing the employee with a more experienced colleague), or other growth activities. Document this in an Individual Development Plan, which outlines the employee's career aspirations, specific development actions, needed resources, and timelines. For example, an IDP might state that a finance officer will cross-train in field operations for two weeks to broaden program knowledge, or that a project manager will pursue a certification in monitoring & evaluation by Q4. Both the manager and employee should have responsibilities in the IDP – the employee might commit to certain actions (enrolling in a course, reading materials, etc.) and the manager commits to support (finding budget, scheduling time, providing contacts). **Tie development goals to the organization's needs** as well, so it's a win-win (e.g. if the NGO will need a new program lead next year, an IDP goal might prepare a staffer for that role). This shows the employee a potential career path within the NGO. Importantly, follow up on these plans regularly (for instance, discuss progress on development goals during one-on-ones each quarter). When employees see that promised development is actually happening – and that it's taken seriously – it builds trust and motivation. A culture of internal growth can become a virtuous cycle, boosting retention. In one survey, 94% of employees said they would stay longer if the employer invested in their learning ⁸ , and indeed, high-performing nonprofits intentionally **develop from within** to increase impact ⁹ .

6. Recognize, Reward, and Remediate Performance Appropriately: Performance management isn't just about identifying problems – it should actively encourage high performance through recognition and address low performance with support. Build in mechanisms to **reward excellent performance** in a timely way. In an NGO context, monetary rewards may be modest, but recognition can be powerful: public acknowledgement in staff meetings, awards for teams, opportunities for advancement or attending a conference, extra PTO, etc. Ensure that good work is celebrated consistently (this can be as simple as a shout-out email or as formal as an "employee of the quarter" program). Such recognition, especially when tied to the organization's values ("You really lived our value of 'collaboration' in the way you coordinated that multi-partner project"), reinforces positive behavior and keeps top performers engaged ³⁶ ³⁷ . Conversely, when performance issues arise, address them with a constructive plan. If an employee is struggling despite feedback, implement a **Performance Improvement Plan (PIP)** that documents the performance gaps, sets specific improvement targets over the next 60–90 days, and outlines the support the organization will provide (additional training, more frequent check-ins, mentorship, etc.). The tone of a PIP in an NGO should still align with the mission – it's about helping the person succeed if possible, not purely punitive. However, do make it clear that improvement is expected and follow through with consequences if standards aren't met (up to role change or termination in worst cases). Consistency and fairness here are key: similar issues should trigger similar responses across the organization to

avoid perceptions of favoritism. Managers might consult an HR focal point for guidance on PIPs and labor law compliance. By rewarding high performers and constructively managing low performers, you create a performance culture that is both **high-achieving and supportive**. Everyone knows that good work will be appreciated and that struggling team members will be guided (but also held accountable), which boosts overall morale and productivity.

By following these steps, an NGO can transform its performance management from a bureaucratic formality into an ongoing process that drives staff development and organizational learning. Remember that building this culture is an iterative journey – gather feedback on the process itself and refine it. Over time, these practices will become ingrained habits that continuously fuel both individual growth and mission success.

Tools / Templates

Implementing performance and feedback practices is easier with the right tools and templates. Below are some practical tools and frameworks NGOs can adapt to their needs:

- **Goal-Setting Templates (SMART Goals and OKRs):** Use a standard template to define each goal with clear criteria. A **SMART goal template** prompts you to specify the objective, how it will be measured, who will achieve it, its relevance to the mission, and a deadline. Alternatively, an **OKR worksheet** helps set an Objective (qualitative goal) and 3–5 Key Results (measurable outcomes) for each employee or team. These templates ensure goals are well-structured and aligned from the start.
- **One-on-One Meeting Agenda:** A simple one-on-one template or checklist can guide regular check-ins. It might include sections for updates from the employee, progress on goals since last meeting, challenges/roadblocks, feedback (both manager to employee and employee to manager), and any support needed. Using a consistent agenda ensures important topics (like development or obstacles) aren't skipped and creates a record of each conversation.
- **Performance Review Form:** Develop a standardized performance appraisal form that managers and employees can use during formal reviews. The form typically includes: a review of goals and whether they were met (with space for commentary), assessment of core competencies or values (e.g. communication, teamwork, initiative – rated or described), and a summary section for overall performance level and accomplishments. It should also have prompts for the **employee's self-assessment** and for the **manager's feedback**, to ensure both perspectives are captured. Having a uniform form across the NGO makes evaluations fairer and easier to calibrate.
- **360° Feedback Surveys:** If implementing multi-source feedback, use a structured survey or questionnaire for colleagues to provide anonymous input. Tools for 360-degree feedback often include rating scales and open comments on areas like teamwork, leadership, communication for the subject. Many NGOs can use free or low-cost online survey tools to collect this feedback. A template questionnaire can be reused for any role (with slight tweaks) – it should assure confidentiality and focus on constructive observations. Compile the results in a summary report for the employee's development only (not as a "scorecard"), and train managers on how to discuss 360 feedback sensitively.

- **Feedback Frameworks (SBI/STAR):** Provide managers (and all staff) with a simple model to structure feedback conversations. Two popular ones are the **SBI model** – Situation, Behavior, Impact – and the **STAR model** – Situation/Task, Action, Result. For example, using SBI: “In yesterday’s meeting (Situation), you interrupted the speaker multiple times (Behavior), which caused some frustration in the group (Impact).” This helps feedback be specific and focused on behaviors, not personality. Such frameworks can be shared as a one-page tip sheet or wallet card to remind feedback-givers how to phrase their input constructively. Over time, everyone learns to give feedback in a consistent, respectful manner.
- **Individual Development Plan (IDP) Template:** Create a template for documenting development goals and plans for each employee. An IDP form typically lists the employee’s long-term career aspiration, the specific development objectives for the coming year (e.g. “Improve project management skills” or “Gain experience in advocacy”), the planned activities to achieve each objective (training, assignments, mentoring), required resources/support, and target completion dates. It should also note the manager’s role in facilitating each item. Both the employee and manager sign off on the plan. Keeping IDPs on file (even a simple Word document or spreadsheet) and reviewing them periodically helps ensure development commitments are acted upon.
- **Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) Template:** For handling underperformance consistently, use a PIP form. This document outlines the performance issues, the required improvement (with clear metrics or examples of what success looks like), the timeframe (e.g. 60 days), check-in intervals (weekly coaching sessions), and the support the organization will provide (perhaps training or closer supervision). It also states the consequences if improvement is not achieved. Having a template ensures that all PIPs cover these critical elements and treat employees equitably. Managers should fill it out in consultation with HR. A written PIP sets a structured path for an employee to get back on track and protects the NGO by documenting the process.
- **Recognition and Feedback Platforms:** While not always necessary, technology can help enable ongoing feedback. Some NGOs use simple tools like Slack or Microsoft Teams with a plug-in for recognition (e.g. a “kudos” channel where anyone can post praise for a colleague, tagged with a company value). Others might use an HR system or dedicated performance management software (like Lattice, Betterimpact, or 15Five) that allows real-time feedback notes, goal tracking, and performance journal entries for each staff member. If resources permit, adopting a lightweight **performance management software** can automate reminders for check-ins, collect 360 feedback, and store review data. Templates for goals, one-on-ones, and reviews are often built into these tools. Even without specialized software, shared documents or spreadsheets can serve as a central tracker for goals and feedback across the team.
- **Competency Framework:** As a foundational reference, consider developing a competency dictionary for common roles or levels in your NGO. This is a list of key competencies (skills, behaviors, values) that drive success, each with definitions and maybe proficiency levels. For example, competencies might include “Community Engagement”, “Financial Accountability”, “Innovation”, or “DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion)”. Defining these helps in several ways: managers can refer to it when giving feedback (“one area to work on is your competency in Advocacy Networking...”), employees know what skills to develop for advancement, and it provides a basis for fair evaluations. Many organizations adapt existing competency libraries to their context. A simple version could be a one-page summary per competency with examples of what good vs. poor

demonstration looks like. This tool underpins the whole performance and growth system by clarifying what “good performance” means beyond just hitting numeric targets.

Each of these tools should be customized to fit the NGO's size and context. Start simple – for instance, pilot a new feedback template with one department and refine it based on their input. The aim is to have a **consistent toolkit** that makes it easier for managers to engage in performance management and for employees to understand the process. When everyone is using the same playbook (forms, models, and platforms), the performance and development cycle becomes more transparent and effective.

Case Vignettes

To illustrate how these practices play out, here are two real-life inspired case vignettes of NGOs improving their performance, feedback, and growth processes.

Case Vignette 1: MissionAid International – From Annual Reviews to Continuous Coaching

MissionAid International is a mid-sized global health NGO with around 80 staff across four countries. Two years ago, MissionAid's HR director noted troubling signs: employee engagement survey scores were low, particularly on questions about feedback and growth, and turnover was creeping up, especially among younger professionals. Interviews revealed a common complaint – **annual performance reviews** were perfunctory and often late, with little follow-up, and staff felt “in the dark” the rest of the year. One talented program officer even quit, citing “no feedback or development” as a reason. MissionAid's leadership realized the existing process (a once-a-year appraisal with basic ratings and a salary discussion) was not serving the organization or its people.

The NGO decided to revamp its approach, guided by the philosophy of continuous improvement. First, MissionAid trained all managers in a two-day workshop on giving constructive feedback, setting SMART goals, and coaching techniques. They introduced monthly one-on-one meetings for every manager-employee pair – a big culture change for some veteran managers who were used to only formal check-ins. HR provided a simple one-on-one template to guide these chats and asked managers to log at least a short summary in a shared system, to increase accountability. Managers were also encouraged to recognize good performance publicly; soon, shout-outs became a standing item in all-staff meetings (“Emily did an amazing job facilitating the community workshop last week – thank you!”).

Six months into the change, MissionAid added a **mid-year “checkpoint” review**, which was a lighter version of the annual review. Rather than waiting until year-end, managers and staff in July each filled a one-page form on progress toward goals and key strengths or difficulties, then met to discuss and adjust goals if needed. For the year-end review, the organization shifted the tone to be more future-focused. They removed the forced ranking of employees and instead used a narrative format with ratings only on core competencies. Crucially, they separated the compensation discussion: salary adjustments were decided in a committee using broad performance categories and communicated by a short meeting a month after the review. The review meeting itself became solely about feedback and growth – managers were explicitly told to spend most of it discussing development opportunities and career aspirations for the employee.

One example was *Arjun*, a field coordinator in India who had struggled with reporting timeliness. In the old system, this would surface as a rebuke in his annual appraisal. Under the new system, Arjun's manager began giving him quick feedback after each report, and in their one-on-ones they identified that Arjun had time management issues. By mid-year, Arjun's check-in review noted improvement and they agreed he

would benefit from a **time management webinar** and a buddy system to help remind him of deadlines. By year-end, Arjun not only improved his reporting (on-time and higher quality) but also felt proud of his growth; his review conversation was positive, focusing on how he could take on a larger project next.

After a year of these changes, MissionAid saw tangible results. The next employee survey showed a 25% increase in the proportion of staff who agreed “I receive useful feedback on my performance.” Turnover dropped from 18% to 10% that year. Importantly, staff themselves began to seek more feedback – some set up peer review sessions to get input from colleagues. Managers reported that issues were being addressed earlier rather than festering. For instance, a conflict between two team members was resolved in a manager-mediated monthly check-in before it impacted the project. MissionAid’s director notes, “We’ve built a coaching culture. People aren’t afraid of feedback now – it’s just part of how we work.” The case of MissionAid International demonstrates that even a modest-sized NGO, by instituting regular feedback loops and focusing on employee development, can markedly improve engagement and performance outcomes.

Case Vignette 2: Community Health Alliance – Embedding Fairness and Growth in Evaluations

Community Health Alliance (CHA) is a humanitarian NGO operating in 10 countries. CHA had a performance review process on paper, but it hadn’t been updated in years. Each country office did things a bit differently, and there were growing concerns about inconsistency and bias. In one instance, a female project manager in the East Africa office received feedback that she needed to be “more assertive and less emotional” in her annual review, whereas a male colleague with similar behavior was praised for “showing leadership.” Such anecdotes, along with an internal audit of review forms, raised red flags of gender bias and variability in standards. Moreover, staff surveys revealed that many employees didn’t trust the performance review system – some felt it depended on their supervisor’s mood or personal favor. Junior staff also reported reluctance to speak up or disagree in reviews, especially in cultures that defer to authority. Senior leadership realized that without addressing these issues, their performance management was not only ineffective but undermining morale and the organization’s values of equity.

CHA undertook a performance management overhaul with a strong **DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion)** lens. A cross-country working group was formed, including HR, country directors, and employee representatives (with attention to gender balance). This group first updated the **competency framework** for all roles, defining clear criteria for skills and behaviors that reflect CHA’s mission (e.g. “Collaboration”, “Accountability”, “Innovation”). They standardized the performance review form across the organization, incorporating these competencies and training all managers globally on how to use them. A key message was: *focus on evidence and avoid subjective labels*. For example, instead of vague terms like “emotional” or “aggressive”, managers were coached to describe observable behaviors (“interrupts others in meetings”) and the impact, as well as to check their wording against bias. The organization also introduced a **360-degree feedback component** for managerial roles – team members and peers would provide anonymous feedback that would be summarized and shared with the manager for development. This was a big shift in some country offices where hierarchy is strongly respected, so CHA provided orientation to staff on how 360 feedback would be used (developmental, not punitive) and ensured anonymity to encourage honesty.

Another change was splitting the performance discussion into two parts: one focusing on performance evaluation and coaching, and a separate meeting (or later agenda item) for discussing promotions or pay. This came from staff feedback that combining them made the conversation tense and less open – people would not admit challenges if they feared it would immediately affect their raise. CHA’s leadership explicitly told employees: “The first conversation is about *you* – how you can grow and how we can help – it’s not about your raise.” A month later, a brief follow-up happens to discuss any salary adjustments or contract

renewal, based on the documented performance but also budget realities. This approach improved the honesty of the initial review conversations.

One illustrative outcome involved *Veronica*, a country program manager who consistently met her project targets but whose team had complained (informally) about her micromanaging style. Under the new system, Veronica's review included feedback not just from her country director but also a summary of anonymous peer and subordinate input. She was surprised to learn that multiple team members felt stifled by her approach. Because the feedback was delivered in a constructive way (emphasizing that this was an area to develop, not a personal attack), Veronica was receptive. Her manager worked with her to create a development plan: she agreed to take a leadership coaching course and her manager would mentor her on delegation techniques. Over the next year, Veronica improved significantly – her team reported better dynamics, and she even mentored another upcoming manager on inclusive leadership. Without the 360 feedback process, this “blind spot” might have persisted or led to staff resignations.

Overall, after two review cycles with the new process, CHA saw positive changes. Employees reported a greater sense of **fairness**. In a post-review survey, 88% of staff said the feedback they received was respectful and tied to specific examples, an increase from 70% the year prior. The number of female staff reporting that they had a clear development plan went up, and CHA's HR team noted an uptick in internal promotions of women and staff from diverse backgrounds – suggesting that a more equitable evaluation system was helping surface talent that might earlier have been overlooked. Challenges remained (not all managers mastered the new approach immediately, and it took extra effort to do 360 feedback in low-bandwidth field locations), but the trajectory was clear. As one field officer put it, “This year's review felt different – it felt like my manager saw what I actually did and wanted me to succeed, instead of just telling me what I did wrong.” CHA's case demonstrates the importance of embedding fairness and growth into performance management, particularly in a global NGO: by standardizing criteria, checking biases, and encouraging open dialogue, the organization made performance reviews an engine for employee development and trust.

Metrics / KPIs

To gauge the effectiveness of performance and growth initiatives, NGOs should track specific metrics. Below is a table of key **metrics/KPIs** (Key Performance Indicators) and what they measure:

Metric / KPI	Definition & Purpose
Employee Turnover Rate (annual)	The percentage of employees who leave the organization in a year (voluntarily or involuntarily). A declining turnover rate can indicate higher retention and satisfaction, presumably due to better feedback, engagement, and growth opportunities. High turnover, especially of high performers, may signal problems in the performance management system or morale.

Metric / KPI	Definition & Purpose
Employee Engagement Score	A measure from staff surveys that assesses overall engagement or specific items related to performance management. For example, responses to statements like “I receive regular and useful feedback from my manager” or “I have opportunities to learn and grow at this NGO.” Tracking these scores over time (and aiming for higher agreement) will show if the new feedback culture is taking hold. Engagement is linked to performance; Gallup finds teams with higher engagement are more productive and stay longer.
Goal Achievement Rate	The proportion of key goals or performance objectives met by staff each cycle. This can be measured as the percentage of individual goals that were achieved across all employees, or the share of staff who met <i>all</i> their main objectives. It reflects how well expectations are being set and met. If this rate is very low, goals may be unrealistic or support insufficient; if 100% always, goals might be too easy – aim for a challenging but attainable range (e.g. ~70-80% average achievement).
One-on-One Meeting Coverage	A process metric: what percent of scheduled one-on-one check-ins or performance conversations actually occurred on time. For instance, if policy calls for monthly one-on-ones, track manager self-reports or system logs to see how many were conducted. High coverage (>=90%) indicates managers are following through on continuous feedback. If coverage is low, employees may not be getting the regular guidance intended. This metric helps hold managers accountable for engaging in the process.
Internal Promotion Rate	The percentage of job openings (particularly at mid- or senior-level) filled by internal candidates. This reflects the success of growth and development efforts. A rising internal promotion rate means the NGO is building talent from within – staff are acquiring the skills to move up. It can also improve morale (people see career paths) and reduce hiring costs. Conversely, if most vacancies are filled externally, it may indicate insufficient development of current staff.
Training/ Upskilling Investment	This can be measured as training hours per employee per year, or the amount of budget spent on staff development as a percentage of payroll. It's an input metric that shows the organization's commitment to growth. Monitoring it ensures the “growth” part of performance & growth isn't neglected. Over time, correlate it with other outcomes (e.g. does increased training spend link to higher engagement or lower turnover?). Even in NGOs with tight budgets, tracking this metric can help justify continued or increased investment in L&D.
Performance Review Completion & Quality	Track the completion rate of formal performance reviews (e.g. 100% of staff received an annual review on time). This ensures the process covers everyone and is taken seriously. In addition, consider a quality audit – e.g. HR can sample completed appraisals to evaluate if feedback given was substantive and aligned with guidelines. Perhaps create a simple score for review quality (did the manager discuss development? give at least 3 specific feedback examples? etc.). Monitoring quality helps identify if additional manager training is needed.

By regularly monitoring these metrics, NGOs can diagnose how well their performance management system is working and where to adjust. For example, if engagement scores aren't improving despite

frequent feedback, perhaps the **quality** of feedback needs attention. If turnover among high performers remains high, maybe growth plans need strengthening or recognition is insufficient. It's important to disaggregate some metrics – e.g. engagement or turnover by gender or location – to ensure the system is equitable (you might find one department with low check-in rates or particular groups feeling less supported, which then can be addressed specifically). Set targets for each metric (realistic and tied to your starting baseline) to create accountability. For instance, aim to have 90% of employees agree they get useful feedback within 2 years, or aim to promote X% of managers from inside. Use these KPIs as a learning tool: discuss them in management meetings, and share appropriate ones with staff to show progress (or commitment to improvement). Remember, what gets measured gets managed – these metrics will help keep the NGO's performance, feedback, and growth efforts on track and continuously improving.

Risks & Mitigations

Implementing performance and feedback initiatives in an NGO comes with potential risks. Below are common risks and challenges, along with suggested mitigation strategies for each:

- **Risk: Unconscious Bias and Unfair Evaluations.** There is a danger that biases (gender, racial, cultural, etc.) can creep into feedback and ratings – as evidence, women and minorities often receive inequitable feedback ³⁸ ¹⁵. *Mitigation:* Provide **bias awareness training** for anyone who gives evaluations. Use structured criteria and behavior-based rubrics to evaluate performance (focusing on what was done and its impact, not personal traits). Implement calibration sessions where managers discuss ratings together to ensure consistency and call out potential bias (for example, if one manager's reviews show a pattern of women being described with certain language, address it). If resources allow, leveraging 360° feedback can also balance out one person's perspective. Emphasize an organizational value of equity and include HR oversight in the review process to audit and correct biased outcomes.
- **Risk: Feedback Avoidance (Culture of Silence).** In some teams or cultures, managers and staff may avoid giving honest feedback, especially negative feedback, to “keep the peace.” This can result in issues festering or lack of improvement. *Mitigation:* **Normalize constructive feedback** through training and leadership example. Leaders should explicitly encourage feedback and even share stories of mistakes or learning from criticism to reduce stigma. Adopt frameworks like “Start-Stop-Continue” in meetings to make feedback routine. Also, ensure reviews include discussing not just weaknesses but also strengths and aspirations, to keep the tone positive and future-oriented. If certain managers consistently avoid confronting performance problems, coach them and, if needed, make the ability to give feedback part of *their* performance criteria. Creating a safe, blame-free environment (psychological safety) will gradually help people speak up. It can help to schedule feedback opportunities (e.g. after-action reviews post-project) so it becomes an expected part of workflow.
- **Risk: Overemphasis on Quantitative Targets (Goal Tunnel Vision).** If performance is too narrowly defined by hitting numeric targets, staff might neglect important intangible aspects or, worse, engage in unethical behavior to meet goals at any cost ¹¹. For instance, focusing only on fundraising dollars could incentivize relationship-damaging tactics with donors. *Mitigation:* Take a **balanced scorecard** approach – include qualitative dimensions (like how results are achieved, alignment with values, teamwork, client satisfaction) in evaluations. Make it clear that *how* outcomes are achieved matters. Encourage goal adjustment if context changes (agility). Periodically review

goals at a senior level to ensure they are stretching but realistic and mission-consistent. If any unethical or corner-cutting behavior is observed, address it immediately and reaffirm the importance of ethics and well-being over hitting a number. Essentially, reinforce that performance management is about learning and improving impact, not just chasing metrics.

- **Risk: Linking Reviews Directly to Pay or Punitive Measures.** When performance evaluation is immediately tied to salary increases, bonuses, or contract renewal, employees may feel anxious or become defensive, withholding information or avoiding risks. It can also skew managers to inflate evaluations to justify pay raises or conversely to deflate them to avoid giving a raise. *Mitigation:* **Separate developmental feedback from compensation decisions in timing and communication.** Many organizations now conduct feedback-centric reviews first, and discuss compensation separately. If complete separation isn't feasible, at least allocate the majority of the review meeting to development talk, and handle the pay discussion as a minor administrative note at the end. Additionally, consider decoupling performance ratings from a strict pay formula – use them as one input among others (budget, tenure, market rates) to reduce extreme pressure. Clearly communicate how compensation is decided to maintain transparency. By reducing the immediate stakes, you encourage more open dialogue in reviews. As Oxford HR experts advise, focus on performance growth in the conversation, not just justification for a raise ³⁴ ³⁵ .
- **Risk: Manager Overload and Inconsistency.** Introducing frequent check-ins and coaching expectations can overwhelm busy managers, leading to uneven application – some managers might do monthly meetings diligently, others let them slip, causing inequity. Also, not all managers will instantly have the skills to coach effectively. *Mitigation:* Gain **leadership commitment** that this is a priority (managers' managers must also check that they are doing it – e.g. a director asks her team leads in their meetings, "how are your one-on-ones going?"). Keep the process efficient: provide tools (templates, software) to streamline paperwork. Perhaps start with bimonthly check-ins if monthly is too much at first. Offer ongoing manager support – e.g. a community of practice where managers share tips or challenges in giving feedback. Recognize and reward managers who excel at developing their teams (make it a criterion in *their* appraisal). If a manager persistently underperforms in people management, address it as a development need or consider leadership changes, because inconsistency erodes trust. Using metrics like one-on-one coverage rates (from the earlier section) can flag where follow-through is lagging, so you can intervene.
- **Risk: Feedback Miscommunication or Emotional Fallout.** Without care, feedback can be delivered in a manner that demotivates or alienates employees – e.g. overly harsh criticism, or feedback interpreted incorrectly due to cultural context or individual sensitivity. This can hurt relationships and performance. *Mitigation:* Train on **feedback delivery** – using respectful language, focusing on behavior not personality, and balancing negatives with positives. Encourage managers to use the SBI or similar model to ground feedback in specifics. For employees prone to taking feedback hard, managers might use a coaching style of asking questions ("How do you feel that project went? What could be improved?") to make it more of a dialogue. Also, instill a practice of follow-up after tough feedback: the manager should check in a few days later to ensure the employee is processing it and to reassert support ("I know the last review was intense, but I'm here to help you succeed – let's outline next steps together"). Building an organizational norm of empathy and assuming positive intent goes a long way. Sometimes pairing constructive feedback with a forward-looking action plan helps the employee focus on improvement rather than blame. And remember, **celebrate progress** – mitigate the sting of feedback by later recognizing when someone has made efforts to improve.

- **Risk: Lack of Sustained Leadership Support.** If senior leaders do not consistently champion the new performance and growth practices, they might lose momentum. For example, if the executive director never participates in her own review or dismisses the process as “HR’s thing,” managers and staff will quickly follow suit. *Mitigation: Lead from the top.* Ensure that the CEO/Executive Director and top team visibly engage in the process – they should set their own goals publicly, perhaps share an example of feedback they received, and ensure their direct reports get quality reviews. Incorporate performance management responsibilities into leadership evaluations. Communicate success stories organizationally (e.g. “Our Uganda office had 100% review completion on time – thank you to them for prioritizing staff development!”). If the organization’s board is involved in executive evaluation, align that with these principles too. Keeping performance management on the agenda at leadership meetings (reviewing those KPIs, discussing talent development) will signal its importance. Essentially, make it part of the organizational DNA, not a passing initiative.

By anticipating these risks and taking proactive steps, an NGO can avoid common pitfalls and ensure its performance and feedback system remains positive and effective. The overarching principle is to keep the system **fair, supportive, and focused on learning** – whenever a risk pushes it off that course, recalibrate using the strategies above. Remember, a good performance management system should ultimately reduce risks for the organization (like losing key staff or tolerating poor performance) rather than create new ones, so continuously refine the process with that in mind.

Checklist

Use this checklist to implement and maintain effective performance, feedback, and growth practices in your NGO:

- [] **Link roles to mission:** Ensure every employee has clear goals or responsibilities that directly tie into the NGO’s mission and strategic objectives. Communicate the “why” behind each goal so staff see meaning in their work ¹⁸ .
- [] **Set and agree on SMART goals:** For each performance period, establish Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound goals (or OKRs) jointly with the employee. Document them in a goals plan and confirm mutual understanding.
- [] **Train managers in feedback and coaching:** Provide initial and periodic training for managers on delivering constructive feedback, conducting one-on-ones, and evaluating without bias. Make sure managers feel confident and equipped – their skill is pivotal ³⁹ .
- [] **Schedule regular one-on-one check-ins:** Institute a schedule (e.g. monthly) for managers to meet with each team member. Use a standard agenda to discuss progress, roadblocks, and development. Track completion to ensure these happen consistently.
- [] **Recognize achievements frequently:** Implement ways to acknowledge good performance in real time (verbal praise, team emails, shout-outs aligned with core values, small awards). Encourage a culture of appreciation alongside constructive feedback.

- [] **Conduct mid-year and annual reviews:** Perform a formal review at least annually (mid-year is highly recommended too). Have both manager and employee prepare (including self-assessment). Focus the discussion on insights and future growth, not just past ratings.
- [] **Separate performance discussion from pay decisions:** Structure the process so that the developmental review conversation happens independently (in time or emphasis) from salary/pay announcements ³⁴. This keeps the review candid and developmental.
- [] **Create/update Individual Development Plans:** After each review, ensure an IDP is made or refreshed for the employee, outlining specific training or growth actions. Verify that both manager and employee have tasks to carry out the plan. Revisit these plans quarterly.
- [] **Gather multi-source feedback (if possible):** Consider obtaining feedback from peers, subordinates, or partners especially for leadership roles. Even a simple 360-feedback survey or a peer review round can enrich the perspective and catch blind spots.
- [] **Ensure documentation and consistency:** Use the provided templates (goal plans, check-in notes, review forms, PIPs) to document each step. This not only creates records, but also standardizes practice. Conduct a quick consistency review – for example, HR can compare a sample of review forms across departments to ensure similar standards.
- [] **Address performance issues promptly:** Don't wait for year-end. If an employee is underperforming despite feedback, initiate a Performance Improvement Plan with clear targets and support. Monitor it closely. Likewise, address any misconduct or serious issues immediately through appropriate channels.
- [] **Monitor key metrics:** Track the health of your performance management via metrics like engagement survey results (feedback and growth questions), turnover rates, % of reviews completed on time, etc. Review these at leadership level periodically and act on any negative trends.
- [] **Iterate based on feedback:** Solicit feedback about the performance management process itself from employees and managers. For instance, do a quick annual survey asking, "Was the feedback you received helpful? How can we improve the process?" Use this input to refine tools, training, or timing. Continuously improve the system so it stays relevant and effective.

By following this checklist, your NGO will create a more equitable and growth-oriented performance management system. Regularly revisit the checklist to ensure ongoing compliance. Over time, these practices should become ingrained, leading to a more engaged team and greater mission impact.

Glossary

- **Performance Management:** An ongoing process of defining, monitoring, and improving employee performance in alignment with organizational goals. It includes setting expectations, providing feedback and coaching, evaluating results, and developing talent. (Distinct from a one-time appraisal, performance management is continuous.)

- **Performance Appraisal:** A formal, periodic evaluation of an employee's job performance, typically documented and discussed in a review meeting. Often annual or semi-annual, it summarizes how well the employee met objectives and may inform decisions on promotions or raises. Traditionally, appraisals involve ratings and written comments.
- **Continuous Feedback:** A practice of providing informal, frequent feedback on an employee's work rather than waiting for a formal review. This can happen in real-time or through regular check-ins. Continuous feedback aims to guide performance in the moment, reinforce good behaviors, and correct issues before they escalate, fostering continuous improvement.
- **360-Degree Feedback:** A feedback process where an employee receives performance input from a circle of sources – e.g. their manager, peers, direct reports (if applicable), and sometimes external partners or clients. The feedback is often collected via anonymous surveys and compiled into a report. 360 feedback provides a multi-perspective view of strengths and areas for development, especially useful for managers or leadership development.
- **SMART Goals:** A framework for setting clear and effective goals. SMART stands for Specific (clear and unambiguous), Measurable (with criteria to track progress or completion), Achievable (realistic and attainable), Relevant (aligned with broader objectives or mission), and Time-bound (having a deadline or time frame). Using SMART criteria ensures goals are well-defined and actionable.
- **OKRs:** Stands for Objectives and Key Results. It is a goal-setting methodology where an Objective is a qualitative goal (what you want to achieve) and the Key Results are a set of specific, quantitative outcomes that indicate progress toward the objective. OKRs are usually set quarterly or annually and tracked regularly. They help align individual and team efforts with organization-wide priorities.
- **Key Performance Indicator (KPI):** A quantifiable measure used to evaluate the success in meeting objectives. In performance management, KPIs can refer to metrics for individual performance (like sales volume, projects completed) or HR metrics (like turnover rate, training hours). KPIs are the numbers that signal how well something is performing, guiding decision-making.
- **Individual Development Plan (IDP):** A personalized plan that outlines an employee's development goals and the specific steps or resources to achieve them. It typically includes skills or competencies to develop, activities like training or mentoring, and target timelines. An IDP is agreed upon by the employee and manager and reviewed periodically. It serves as a roadmap for the employee's growth and career progression.
- **Performance Improvement Plan (PIP):** A structured action plan for an employee who is not meeting performance expectations. A PIP details the areas of underperformance, the specific improvements needed (with measurable criteria), resources or support the employer will provide, and a timeline for reevaluation. It's essentially a formal agreement to help an employee get back to satisfactory performance, with the understanding that failing a PIP could lead to further action (like reassignment or termination).
- **Calibration:** In performance management, calibration is the process of having managers come together to review and standardize their evaluations of employees to ensure fairness and consistency. For example, managers might compare notes on what a "exceeds expectations" rating

looks like to apply similar standards. Calibration helps eliminate manager-to-manager leniency or strictness biases and align performance criteria across the organization.

- **Coaching (Management Coaching):** A style of managing where the manager acts as a coach to develop an employee's skills, rather than just directing or evaluating. Coaching involves asking guiding questions, providing constructive feedback, listening, and helping the employee find solutions or set development goals. The aim is to unlock the employee's potential and improve their performance through support and guidance, not just instruction.
- **Engagement (Employee Engagement):** The level of an employee's emotional commitment, motivation, and connection to their work and the organization. Highly engaged employees are enthusiastic, involved, and willing to put in discretionary effort. Engagement is influenced by factors like receiving recognition, having opportunities to grow, believing in the mission, and one's relationship with their manager (including feeling supported through feedback). It's often measured via surveys and is linked to performance outcomes.

By understanding these terms, HR practitioners and managers can communicate clearly about the performance and growth processes. They form the shared language of an effective performance management system.

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Word Count: 4,270

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