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Subject

PDP review

Brief for

DAC Ops

Author

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Background

1. This report reviews the current practices associated with Personal Development Plans (PDPs). The North West Area has sampled various PDP's and has conducted extensive engagement with staff from firefighter to group manager level. The purpose of this document is to share those findings and identify possible areas to improve the effectiveness of the PDP system for learning and development.

Current guidance

2. There is limited guidance available in relation to the issuing, development and review of PDPs. Early versions of PDP guidance were produced, but have not been available on Hotwire since its refresh. There is no associated policy or training available on Big Learning. It would be reasonable, given these points, to suggest that many of the pathways to PDP guidance and learning have become disjointed and this can lead to confusion for the manager and recipient alike.

Staff engagement

3. Extensive engagement was carried out with staff ranging from firefighter to Group Manager using a range of methods. These included:
 - Questionnaire circulated to all NW Area Watch Officers
 - Talks with the watches by the NW Area SSSO SM's during QA audits in June & July in Ealing, Barnet, Enfield & Haringey borough
 - Discussions with the Learning and Development teams
 - Discussions with the Information Management team



Frequency of use

4. Since the introduction of the PDP system in April 2007 there have been over 12900 PDP's created, over 7200 have been for uniformed personnel. PDPs are generated in several ways. They are generated as a result of IMP points, managerial action, under performance, disciplinary awards and as standard tariffs for issues such as vehicle accidents etc, or are prompted by the PDR system. Although it is difficult to extract exact figures due to inconsistencies with recording, over 90% of the PDPs issued in 2015-16 related to some element of underperformance.
5. There has been a clear increase in use of the PDP system over time. However, given the system is aimed at personal development, the overall number of development oriented PDP's is disproportionately low.

Challenges and Areas for Improvement

6. Analysis of the numbers and content PDPs recorded, along with a review of the feedback gained through staff engagement has identified a number of challenges and areas for improvement in the use of PDPs.

Negative associations with the use of PDPs

7. The overwhelming response from uniformed users was clear that the system carried negative connotations. The receipt of a PDP was usually perceived to be punitive and as a result people are unlikely to see the development as meaningful, or engage in it fully.
8. Feedback included:
 - *"Its not an unreasonable way of maintaining records of development for under performance and the start of formal performance management. However there is a stigma attached to it that it is more of a punishment tool and not enough is given to the idea of developing our selves."*
 - *"There needs to be improvement/standardisation of the expected use."*
9. PDPs are also used in association with Discipline cases without a clear link to development activity which may serve to reinforce the punitive associations. Some examples of actual PDP titles that demonstrate this include:
 - "Stage 1 Attendance"
 - "Stage 2 discipline and Falloden Road roof fire"
 - "Stage 3 action plan"
10. Although it is recognised that the system is intended for learning, personnel state that they are hard to engage with and that there is a lack of guidance on the PDP process. This has the effect of leaving some managers unaware of the outcomes of the PDP that they are issuing. Such issues are likely to limit the learning that could and should be gained through the use of PDPs.

IMP points and associated PDPs

11. Over 85% of the written feedback and 95% of the verbal feedback was negative in relation to IMP Development Points and associated PDPs. Without exception, during the consultation, they were perceived to be punitive, and demoralising.
12. Feedback included:
 - *"How can you use SMART objectives when you need to do a PDP for someone who forgot to put their OIC tabard on!"*
13. Feedback also pointed to the development points being highlighted in red where other points are recorded in green which further serves to reinforce the negative associations. This looks punitive and discourages the recipient. This colour remains even after they have been acknowledged by the recipient and line manager. The red colour is also associated with the way in which a failed course is recorded which further serves to reinforce the punitive associations.
14. IMP comments (positive and developmental) stay in the observation tab for 2-years, whilst all other observations show up for 3-months. This reflects the risk-critical nature of operational performance, however, the current system means that negative points are permanently visible. This is because all development points should be linked to a PDP, meaning the development point will remain on the system for as long as the PDP is on the system which is permanent.
15. Follow up questioning indicated that people who had received a PDP from an IMP point felt their receipt had a negative impact on their future operational performance. This is perhaps unsurprising given the focus on the perception of those who may be issuing an IMP point which may distract from the operational goal at hand. Both the National Operational Guidance for incident command, and the CIOA Future of Incident Command report identify that additional

stress and focus on accountability anxieties can have a negative impact on operational decision making, and these phenomena have been linked with risk aversion.

Managers feel under pressure to issue PDPs

16. There was also evidence that, on some occasions, managers felt pressured to issue PDP's when they thought it was not appropriate:
 - "I was told by my line manager that if I did not issue the PDP I would be receiving one."
 - "My line manager informed me that they wanted three PDP's issued by the end of the month even though I did not agree and I was reminded that my PRDS assessment was due around the same time, which inferred to me that I would be getting a negative assessment if I did not comply."
17. Such instances were not isolated and raise concerns about the strength of feeling associated with the use of PDPs. If an issuing manager does not believe in the PDP being issued, it is unlikely that any meaningful learning will be committed to or gained.

Lack of guidance or support in the appropriate use of PDPs

18. It has already been identified that there is little available guidance in the form of documentation and policy is absent. From consultation with the Learning and Development team and Information Management, it was identified that most PDP queries are received by the IM team as opposed to Development and Training. This is not an issue if the query is technical or software based but they are not so well equipped to handle queries relating to the framework behind it such as content and context for creating them. IM also pointed out the wide differences in the level of knowledge and understanding of the PDP process and system demonstrated by the callers.
19. PDP's may also highlight barriers to learning in some candidates and the Author and recipient should be able to follow clear pathways to assessment and support.

Lack of consistency in the use of PDPs

20. Analysis of the content of PDPs has demonstrated that there is little consistency in the use of PDPs, suggesting significant variation in knowledge and understanding of the PDP system by those that issue them. This is perhaps unsurprising given the limited available information on the use of PDPs.
21. This was also the case in the use of standard tariff PDPs which are issued following driving accidents, bodyguard downloads, loss of PPE etc. These should arguably be the most consistent as they are designed to be 'standard'.
22. To give an example of such inconsistency, SERD & vehicle related PDP's were analysed to identify the levels of consistency. A search returned 194 PDP's since April 2012. When analysed by the field "Prompted by", there was little consistency in terms of the recording of a PDP, which should be similar given its issue as a standard tariff. Recording ranged from Managerial (non-disciplinary) (68%), Other (20%) and Development in current role (12%). This again demonstrates the varied levels of understanding of the system amongst assessors.

Potential over use of the PDP system for individuals

23. There was some evidence of individuals receiving high numbers of PDPs, sometimes within a short period of time. For instance, analysis of the PDPs recorded demonstrated a SM(D) receiving 12 PDP's in 12 month period generated by IMP development points. Similarly, a SM with over 8 years experience in role received 7 PDP's following IMP points on the same day, and all appear to be for the same incident. Furthermore, a firefighter with over 28 years of experience received 24 PDP's for "development in role" in a four month period.
24. Whilst it may be possible that a change in manager has led to deficiencies in performance being noted and addressed, it could also be argued that these examples represent a misunderstanding of the appropriate use of PDPs. Given the negative stigma associated with the use of PDPs it is unlikely that such use will result in meaningful learning.

Use of PDPs for overly simple performance issues without a clear link to meaningful development.

25. Analysis of PDPs provided significant numbers of examples where PDPs have been used for overly simple performance issues. Some examples include:

- “Operational Equipment testing & Inspection” – FF with flat batteries in their torch.
- “Branch techniques – inappropriate pressure”
- “Reporting sick” – ensure you follow the policy in future.
- “Loss of PPE”

26. Many of these examples could reasonably be dealt with through a professional discussion. The exception might be for instances of repeated underperformance which the manager feels it appropriate to record. However, where this is the case, it would be more appropriate to record the managerial discussion formally using appropriate templates (such as a Letter 1), and reserving the Personal Development Plans for use when a structured development plan can be formulated and achieved. The current use of PDPs for such instances serves to reinforce punitive associations.

Disproportionate allocation of PDPs for under-represented groups

27. An analysis of employment monitoring data suggests a disproportionate amount of PDPs were issued to staff from under-represented groups. In 2015/16, London Fire Brigade employed 4825 operational staff. 608 staff were from BME groups and 330 were women. Out of the 608 BME staff, 149 had a live PDP. This equates to 24 % of BME staff as compared to 20% of white staff. 31% of operational women were in receipt of a PDP compared to just 19% of operational men. This is in line with 2014-15 PRDS results which suggest women receive less positive ratings than men and BME groups receive less positive ratings than white staff.

Disproportionate allocation of PDPs for certain operational roles

28. Analysis of the PDPs issued according to role has revealed that around 10% of the workforce are attracting 68% of the total PDP's, which are generated as a result of negative IMP development points. Watch Managers have attracted 45% and Station Managers 23% of the PDP numbers generated. Also, at 34%, a significant proportion of the PDPs tagged as “Development in role” were for Watch Managers (26%) and Station Managers (8%).

This would suggest that more junior managers are disproportionately issued with PDPs. Given the punitive associations identify through engagement, this may be damaging to relationships with other managers and may contribute to the ‘them and us’ perception identified through staff engagement and the stress survey.

PDPs generated by PDRs are overly onerous

29. The Learning and Development team have indicated that the current system for creating PDP's for development candidates was overly onerous on the manager. A significant number of PDPs have been prompted automatically by the PDR system. This equated to since 2012, which is nearly 10% of all PDPs.
30. There is recognition that the E-PDR should be suitable and fit for purpose to use as a stand alone development tool. The team has now started to recommend that the PDP system should not be used for new development candidates.

Conclusion and Recommendations

31. The current use of PDPs is considered my most to be punitive, and therefore meaningful engagement is difficult to elicit. Staff engagement found repeated examples of this straining relationships between staff and managers and it currently is not conducive to development. There is also little evidence of consistency in the use of PDPs which may contribute to the negative stigma currently associated with the use of PDPs.
32. The PDP concept should be positive and engaging. It should represent commitment from managers to take agreed action to support the development of staff. It should be a vehicle of best practice and represent a level of development that all staff should expect. In order to move to this

position so investment in the process is needed, along with a review of the current guidance. This section outlines in detail some recommendations that should enable a move to this position.

Reissuing of guidance and clearly defined protocols for the use of PDPs with a focus on development

33. This report identified the current lack of available guidance on PDPs. Documents that provide guidance on some elements of PDPs are outlined below, although not all are currently available:

- Personal Development Plan User Guide – 1st October 2012 – V 1.0.3.
- Writing Personal Development Plans Guidance – 31st October 2012 – V 1.0.3.
- Middle managers PDP training package – 2012
- DIOT Policy

34. It is proposed that these documents are refreshed, and clear protocols for the circumstances in which PDPs should be used are produced. This will require a review of the standard tariffs that require a PDPs to ensure that standard tariff PDPs focus on meaningful learning. The crossing of these lines can blur both development and discipline practices, resulting in disengagement from PDP recipients.

Actions:

- Develop clear protocols for use of PDPs that focus on development
- Review current guidance for the use of PDPs
- Review standard tariffs that require PDPs

Upskill managers in the use of PDPs

35. This report noted the current lack of consistency in the use of PDPs. In order to address this it is recommended that managers are upskilled in the new guidance and the use of PDPs. This is particularly important for new managers who may not have previously developed a PDP or be familiar with the previously issued guidance note.

36. It is recommended that existing training packages for managers are reviewed and expanded to be delivered to all managers.

37. In order to assist with the consistent implementation of the revised guidance, it is recommended that possibilities are explored for the service standard support officer teams to support the development and training teams. This could include sampling and moderating electronic PDP's, as well as providing support and guidance to managers.

Actions:

- Review manager training packages with a view to including guidance on the use of PDPs
- Engage with Development and Training to explore ways in which support can be given, linking with the Service Standard Board

Generic development stair casing

38. This would be a set of development objectives and outcomes to support the candidate in their progression toward a specific outcome. For instance a candidate seeking a specialist skill or promotion. The ethos would be a set framework is provided which could have bespoke elements added to tailor the development journey. Some examples are currently being developed within the North West area.

This would provide a standard form of development that candidates wishing to progress can use, and could, in time, be considered as a pre-requisite for entry to the assessment process, application phase etc. (linked with the “pre-post development” work). If employed as a pre requisite, it would enhance the knowledge base of assessment centre candidates and ensure that the process is robust and targeted at the correct level of operational and managerial professionalism to reflect the LFB's organisational aims and objectives.

39. This does not need to be an exhaustive list of templates and they should not be complicated. The templates should be kept current and reviewed as appropriate. The emphasis should be kept on being intuitive and user friendly, It is imperative that the system is usable to ensure the best possible outcomes.
40. In the case of an individual being given a period of temporary promotion the PDP could be used as evidence of prior learning should the individual be successful in a promotion process. This would help in streamlining the EPDR process and would allow an assessor to hone in on areas to best develop the candidate.

Actions:

- Continue to develop some sample generic development PDPs for station based roles
- Pilot the use of sample generic development PDPs

PDP's and EPDR not running in parallel

41. Development status should provide a safe place for the candidate to learn and emphasis should be placed on the development of people through mentoring and coaching. Feedback should always be provided and reflective learning practices encouraged.
42. There are occasions where PDPs are used alongside EPDR's and IMP development points are also used for candidates on development. Whilst these systems can run in parallel it may be considered to be convoluted by some. If a candidate is on development it seems robust enough that the EPDR system should handle the audit trail in its entirety. When a candidate is on development it seems disproportionate to measure their performance as if the candidate were fully competent.
43. With regard to SM and above, it may be considered to assign a candidate to a mentor for the duration of their development. This could be, for example a competent officer of the same role with a minimum of 2 years in that role. There are measurable benefits to employing this practice, not least of which promoting positive working relationships and the sharing of learning.

Actions:

- Consult with Development and Training to consider excluding staff on development from the PDP process, instead picking up structured development with their E-PDR.
- Revised guidance to reflect these principles
- Consider the use of mentors for those on development

Consider revisions Colour of IMP Points

44. The associated paper "PDP Review – IMP Element" outlines some suggested improvements to the IMP Point process that aim to improve the way in which learning is gained from this valuable process.
45. In addition to these improvements, it is suggested that the colour distinction for these associated observations is removed. All points should be recoded in a single colour, removing the punitive appearance and reinforcing the positive aspects of development.

Actions:

- Consult with ORT and Development and Training to establish agreement to standardise the colour of Development points.

Summary of recommendations

- Develop clear protocols for use of PDPs that focus on development
- Consult with ORT in order to discuss revising the wording of the issuing of IMP points within the DIOT policy
- Review current guidance for the use of PDPs

- Review standard tariffs that require PDPs
- Review manager training packages with a view to including guidance on the use of PDPs
- Engage with Development and Training to explore ways in which support can be given, linking with the Service Standard Board
- Continue to develop some sample generic development PDPs for station based roles
- Pilot the use of sample generic development PDPs
- Consult with Development and Training to consider excluding staff on development from the PDP process, instead picking up structured development with their E-PDR
- Revised guidance to reflect these principles
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