



White Paper: Competence and Conduct Standards

Are your people ready to
manage performance
properly?

As part of DIN's 2026 focus on accountable leadership, DIN and The Pathway Academy are supporting members to get ready for the Competence and Conduct Standards landing in 2026.

The standards aren't far off now. And before jumping straight into processes and paperwork, it's worth pausing to think about what the regulator is really getting at: are people genuinely competent and are they behaving in the right way.

Competence, of course, is far more than just being trained. Being trained doesn't automatically mean someone is competent.

Training, on its own, is fairly straightforward. Find a course, book a date, send people along. Job done... right? Not quite.

Real competence means regularly checking where the gaps are, doing something meaningful to close them, building capability over time, and keeping track of whether it's actually working.

And there's one crucial ingredient that makes all of this possible but often gets overlooked or avoided: solid performance management.

It's a core part of the standards for a reason. If you want to maintain competence, you have to manage it.

That really comes down to two things: people's technical competence, and managers' ability to manage performance. If managers struggle with the second part, it's very hard to be confident about the first.

You might already have a performance management framework in place. But be honest, is it being applied consistently well? Or is it mostly sat on a shelf?

Just because you have a process, doesn't mean you're managing performance.

What the regulator expects

When it comes to performance management, the regulator has been pretty clear about expectations:

- ✓ Anyone who interacts with tenants or makes decisions that affect them must have their performance appraised in some way.
- ✓ You need to be able to show how you're developing people's skills, knowledge, experience, and behaviours.
- ✓ You must have a clear way of identifying and dealing with poor performance, including what happens next.

In practice though, The Pathway Academy sees the same issues cropping up again and again across the sector:

- ✗ Managers avoiding difficult conversations, even when they know they need to have them.
 - ✗ Expectations being fuzzy, which makes performance conversations awkward and unclear.
 - ✗ A lack of knowledge of and confidence around using informal consequences early on, before things escalate.
 - ✗ Processes that vary hugely in quality and often feel like a box-ticking exercise.
 - ✗ Performance evaluation that hasn't always been a great experience, leaving managers unsure how to do it well.
 - ✗ Behaviour frameworks that technically exist but mostly sit on a shelf.
-

The opportunity

The good news is that the standards create a real opportunity to do this better. There's plenty you can do to strengthen your approach and make performance management actually work.

1. Behaviour and Competency frameworks

At their best, behaviour frameworks make it really clear what "good" looks like. But many fall down because they're:

- ✗ Too long or complicated to be useful.
- ✗ Too vague to judge performance against later.
- ✗ Poorly connected to performance management and rarely used day to day.
- ✗ Weak at explaining accountability and core people-management skills.
- ✗ Written in language that doesn't feel natural or relatable.

What you're aiming for is balance. Simple enough to use but detailed enough to clearly describe expectations. When done well, behaviour frameworks give everyone clarity and consistency, and they're absolutely worth the effort.

When it comes to competency frameworks: are they worth the effort? Will they sit on a shelf?

Competency frameworks, just like behaviour frameworks, can be extremely useful because they help to take the thinking out for line managers and create a consistent version of what good looks like. If you provide the right guidance for managers and integrate into your processes they can be very useful tools for building development plans and actually building competence within teams.

The trick is giving managers the right guidance, not making them too unwieldy while still making them effective. Overall they can have a very positive impact if implemented well.

2. Performance management

Let's be honest, the sector has tried just about every approach going: annual objectives, quarterly check-ins, regular one-to-ones, team goals...the list goes on.

While everyone has their own preference, there are some approaches that almost never work:

- ✗ Doing nothing and hoping for the best.
- ✗ Creating a process and assuming people will magically follow it.
- ✗ Being so rigid that the process becomes a burden.

What helps instead:

- ✓ Be clear about what the process is actually meant to achieve.
- ✓ Allow flexibility around timing and frequency.
- ✓ If people have to submit something, don't make it too often.
- ✓ Check the quality and step in where it's not working well.
- ✓ Offer short, practical guidance people will actually read.
- ✓ Provide extra support where it's needed.
- ✓ Keep things simple.
- ✓ Focus objectives on what people can control, not just headline KPIs.
- ✓ Be clear about what "good" looks like and measure against it.

The next level of performance management

Get the basics right, and you unlock something even more powerful and can elevate your approach even further.

➡ Focus. Focus. Focus.

The sector loves objectives. Often too many of them.

When everything feels urgent, effort gets spread thinly and progress slows. Now imagine something different. Imagine a single quarter where a small, cross-functional team focuses properly on *one* important area. They dig into the problem, test ideas, and make real changes.

By stopping lower-priority work, you create space for one meaningful win. Cut out duplication, delays and unnecessary activity, and suddenly you've got capacity to tackle the next thing.

A small, focused team will almost always outperform a larger, distracted one. Another important way to view this is "deep and narrow" vs "shallow and wide" i.e. how do we have a *significant* and *lasting* impact in one or two areas of the business, before moving on to the next focus area.

Help people create that focus and protect it.

➡ Stop

The sector is very good at adding things: another KPI, another report, another initiative.

It's not so good at stopping.

Every KPI should earn its place. If it doesn't add value, it shouldn't be there. If your performance process helps people focus on what really matters, rather than just tracking activity, it becomes a genuine driver of performance and impact but far too often there is little clarity coming through objectives on where people should focus on gaining the big wins.

➡ The quality of objectives

Objectives often sound good, but don't always do what they're meant to. Common problems include:

- ✗ Writing aspirations instead of clear objectives.
- ✗ Too focused on tasks rather than outcomes.
- ✗ Objectives targeting KPIs that people can't directly control.
- ✗ Using vague words like "improve" with no detail.
- ✗ Missing timeframes altogether.
- ✗ Repackaging day-to-day responsibilities as objectives.
- ✗ Assuming impact instead of spelling it out.
- ✗ Avoiding priorities and trade-offs.
- ✗ Spending very little time defining what success really looks like.

Managers need clear guidance and support to set focused objectives that drive real, controllable outcomes. At The Pathway Academy, we're currently designing a Manager's Handbook, so we can help clients put excellent guidance into the hands of managers. A 30 page Word-doc process somewhere won't do it, the trick will be: great guidance, packaged well, put in their hands.

Without super clear and helpful guidance to support your process, the chances are managers will keep making the same mistakes.

➡ The golden thread

That famous "golden thread" gets talked about a lot, and yes, it can be tricky to get right. But it's worth the effort.

When it works, everyone understands what the priorities are and how their work contributes. Without it, teams often move forward based on assumptions rather than shared direction.

Setting clear intent and cascading that intent through the business enables each layer to consider: do these objectives align and deliver what my manager's intent is for this year?

3. Performance evaluation

This is another area where the sector has tried everything: ratings, no ratings, soft assessments, no assessments at all. It's no surprise people feel cautious.

But let's be realistic. If you want to run a successful organisation, you need at least a basic sense of how people are performing.

Two things really matter here:

- It doesn't need to be complicated.
- You don't need a heavy, bureaucratic process. A lighter-touch approach can still give you useful insight.

The language really matters

Performance is rarely black and white. People are strong in some areas and less consistent in others. Labels like "does not meet expectations" often miss that nuance.

When categories feel blunt or unfair, managers tend to play it safe and give generous ratings. That helps no one.

The goal is simple: design performance evaluation so it's easy for managers to be *accurate*. The right language and structure make a huge difference.

4. Feedback

Evaluating performance should naturally lead to good feedback.

A small number of people, especially senior ones, consistently showing the wrong behaviours, can cause real damage.

People should be accountable for how they show up at work. Feedback should be easy to give, easy to receive, and part of normal working life.

The best systems use regular, intentional feedback loops that support development while reinforcing accountability.



🔑 5. Management skills

Even with all the right frameworks and processes, great performance management still comes down to skills.

That includes setting clear expectations, using informal consequences well, and having difficult conversations.

Take difficult conversations. Training can explain the theory, but it doesn't always help when someone pushes back on feedback or has an excuse for everything.

Another common trap is saving everything for one big conversation. Managers build it up in their heads, walk in feeling nervous, the other person senses this and it's potentially going badly before it's even begun.

Managers need support to break conversations into smaller steps, point out patterns over time, and use calm, non-triggering language.

Fear makes people less rational. Take the fear out, and conversations become more natural and more likely to happen.

That's why development needs to go beyond one-off training days. Skills are embedded over time.

Blending online learning, practical tools like prompt cards, in-person sessions, and follow-up support works far better. Break skills down, make them usable, and give people space to practice.



For example, these cards cover 99 of the most tricky and difficult issues managers face and break them down into 4 easy to apply steps.

At DIN and The Pathway Academy, we also support this with lunch-and-learns, top-ups, and one-to-one support.

The key point is simple: you need more than one approach. Relying on a single method won't embed the skills managers need.

It's also worth thinking about skill verification. After all that investment, can you see evidence that people are actually applying what they've learned? Are the accountable to do so?

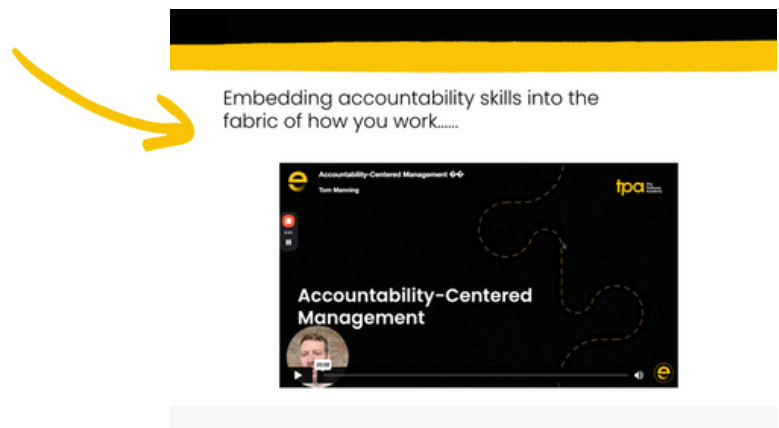
Pulling it all together

To genuinely meet the Competence and Conduct Standards, you need:

- ✓ A clear behaviour framework that shows what good looks like.
- ✓ A performance process that creates focus and alignment.
- ✓ Fair, accurate performance evaluation.
- ✓ Regular feedback.
- ✓ In-person skill development.
- ✓ Practical tools to embed learning.
- ✓ Skill verification.
- ✓ Resources managers can actually use.

When all of this works together, you create clarity, support and accountability. Managers know what's expected, feel supported to do it well and are held to account when it matters.

If you'd like support to be fully ready for the Competence and Conduct Standards, you can find out more about our approach by clicking the image below.





**Tom Manning Founder of
The Pathway Academy**

TWMS Rugby Ltd 20 Market Hill,
Southam CV47 0HF

T: 01788288001

E: tom@thepathwayacademy.co.uk
thepathwayacademy.co.uk

**Disruptive
Innovators
Network**

Driving results, uniting **teams**.