

FREE RESOURCE FOR MANAGERS

The Early Warning Checklist

Spot people issues early, step in with confidence and stop small problems becoming formal ones.

Most workplace problems give off signals long before they reach a grievance or a resignation. This checklist helps you notice those signals, prepare for the conversation and know when it's time to involve formal processes or outside help.

Use it on screen, print it, or download the PDF and share it with your management team. No sign-up needed.

1. Notice the early signs

Tick anything you've noticed in your team over the last month or two. One sign on its own may mean nothing; a pattern is worth a conversation.

- ☐ A change in someone's usual behaviour, mood, performance or timekeeping.
- ☐ The same disagreement resurfacing, even though it was 'sorted'.
- ☐ A conversation you (or another manager) keep putting off.
- ☐ Someone going quiet in meetings, withdrawing or working in isolation.
- ☐ Tension between colleagues that others in the team have started to notice.
- ☐ Small complaints or comments that hint at something bigger.
- ☐ Managers escalating every people issue because they don't feel confident handling it.
- ☐ Rising short-term absence, or a valued person who seems to be disengaging.

2. Prepare before you step in

- ☐ Write down specific, recent examples: what happened, when, and the impact. Facts, not assumptions.
- ☐ Ask yourself what might be behind it: workload, unclear expectations, a relationship issue, health or something outside work.
- ☐ Decide what you want from the conversation, and what support you could offer.
- ☐ Check your own policies (for example absence, grievance or flexible working) so you know the options.
- ☐ If health or a disability could be a factor, consider whether adjustments might help, and take advice before deciding anything.
- ☐ Choose a private time and place where neither of you will be rushed.
- ☐ Talk it through with a trusted sounding board first if you're unsure how to start.

3. Have the conversation

- ☐ Open calmly and explain why you wanted to talk, using your specific examples.
- ☐ Ask open questions ("How are things going with...?", "What would help?") and listen more than you speak.
- ☐ Acknowledge how the other person feels, even if you see things differently.
- ☐ Be clear about what needs to change, and agree what support you'll provide.
- ☐ Agree practical next steps and a date to check in.
- ☐ Keep a brief, factual note of what was discussed and agreed.

4. Follow up

- ☐ Check in when you said you would, even if things seem better.
- ☐ Recognise progress, not just problems.
- ☐ Keep notes factual and store them securely; only share them with people who need to know.
- ☐ Look for patterns: is the same issue showing up elsewhere in the team?

5. Know when to escalate

Early, informal conversations resolve many issues, but not all of them. Follow your formal procedures and take advice if:

- ☐ There's an allegation of serious misconduct, bullying, harassment or discrimination.
- ☐ Someone may be at risk of harm, or a safeguarding concern arises.
- ☐ An employee raises a formal grievance, or asks for the issue to be dealt with formally.
- ☐ The issue continues despite clear expectations, support and time to improve.
- ☐ A working relationship has broken down. If both people are willing, workplace mediation (/workplace-mediation/) may help.

Formal processes should follow your own policies and the Acas Code of Practice on disciplinary and grievance procedures (<https://www.acas.org.uk/acas-code-of-practice-on-disciplinary-and-grievance-procedures/html>). Acas also has helpful guidance on challenging conversations (<https://www.acas.org.uk/acas-guide-to-challenging-conversations-and-how-to-manage-them>) and mediation at work (<https://www.acas.org.uk/mediation>).

This checklist is general guidance to support good people management. It isn't legal advice. For a specific situation, speak to an HR professional or take legal advice.

Seeing the signs in your team? Book a free, no-obligation discovery call with Elite HR Partners: elitehrpartners.com/bookings

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