Northwestern | OFFICE OF HUMAN RESOURCES

Conducting Staff Merit Conversations

A guide for supervisors

This document is a tool to help supervisors prepare for merit conversations, communicate merit information effectively, and manage questions.

Why Are Merit Conversations Important?

- They reinforce Northwestern's commitment to rewarding strong staff performance.
- They demonstrate respect for staff by taking time to talk through information and process.
- They can improve staff engagement and motivate them to achieve greater levels of performance in the upcoming year.

When should you have the conversation?

Please plan on having conversations with staff and librarians by August 23rd. This ensures that all merit decisions have been approved and that you will have communicated those decisions before staff and librarians can see their system-generated merit letter within myHR. Other key dates are listed below.

What	When	For whom
System-generated merit letters are available under the "Pay" tile in myHR	August 25th	Biweekly Staff, Monthly Staff and Librarians
FY20 salaries are effective	August 25th	Biweekly Staff
	September 1st	Monthly Staff and Librarians
Pay reflects FY20 salaries	September 13th	Biweekly Staff
	September 30th	Monthly Staff and Librarians

Components of an Effective Merit Conversation

1 Prepare for the conversation

- Review all merit decisions to ensure that you understand them. If there is a decision you do not understand, speak to your supervisor to ensure alignment.
- Rehearse what you're going to say, choosing the easiest and clearest way of explaining the factors that went into your pay decisions.
- Anticipate how each staff member may react and prepare for responses that address those anticipated questions.

2 Reiterate your staff member's value

- Lead with a reference to or summary of the staff member's performance and convey the value they bring to the position and department.

3 Position pay as one piece in the overall total rewards the University offers

- Total rewards also include health and retirement benefits, wellbeing programs, the opportunity for meaningful work, learning and development opportunities, a collaborative work environment, and opportunities to give back to the community.

4 Be open and transparent

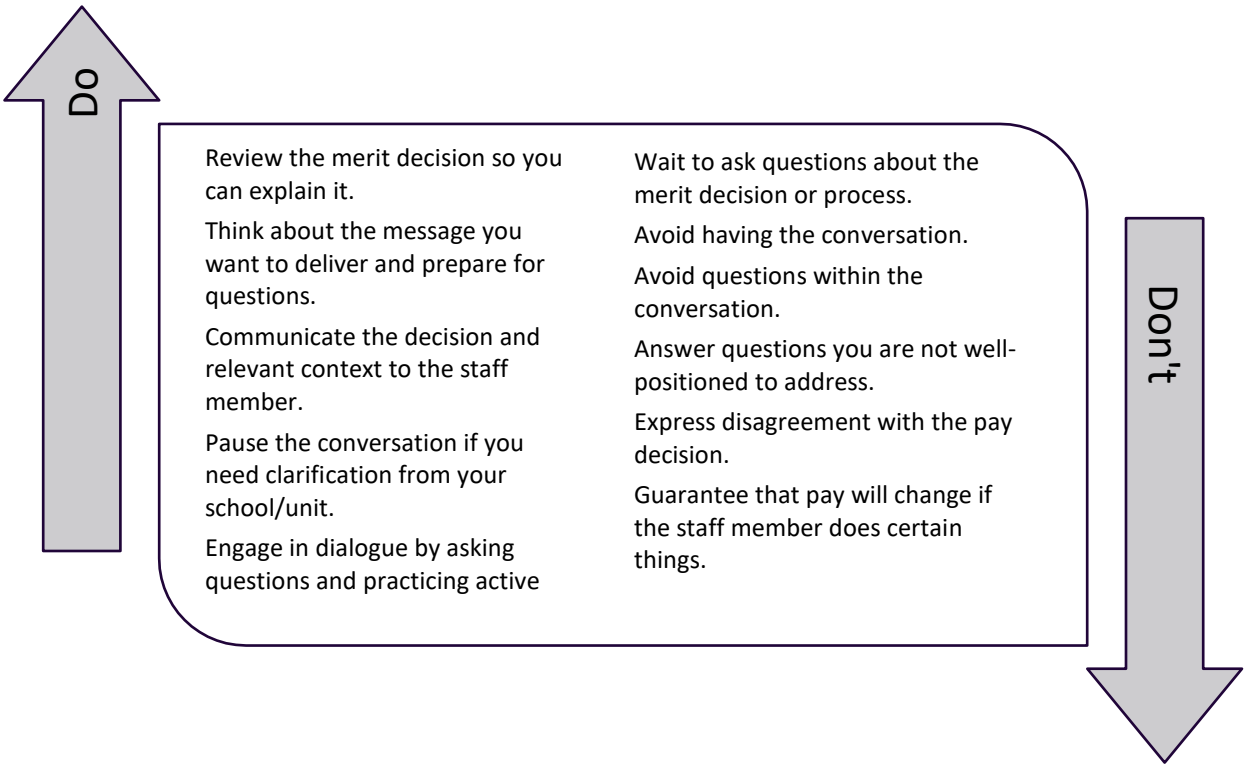
- Explain the factors that led to the merit decision and how the decision was made even if you were not part of the decision.
- Emphasize the role of individual performance on merit relative to other factors. Possible decision factors include:
    - Performance – impact relative to job responsibilities and goals set
    - Market value
    - Experience (critical skills)
    - Greater effort to differentiate based on performance

5 Take Ownership

- Take ownership of all pay decisions that affect your staff member.

6 Be Empathetic

- If a staff member voices dissatisfaction with pay decisions, acknowledge what they've said and show that you empathize with their thoughts and feelings.
- Recognize positive and negative reactions and emotions but stick to the pay decision agreed by the school or unit.
- Ask what questions the staff member has.



Sample Messages

Performance Excellence Rating	Sample Message
Development Needed, no increase	As we discussed previously, there is one area in which I want to see some improvement in the coming year, and we have a plan to address that. Based on your Development Needed rating, you will not be receiving a merit increase this year, and I look forward to working with you on improved performance in the year to come.
Achieving, small increase	As we discussed previously, you have demonstrated solid performance. You are meeting expectations of your role and your contributions are on track relative to your job responsibilities. As we looked at merit increases this year we differentiate pay increases based on high and solid performance. You will be receiving a merit increase of _____.

Discussing How to Increase Pay in the Future

During pay conversations, some staff members will ask about how they can increase their pay in the future. In these cases, provide guidance and suggestions for how your staff member can add value through higher levels of performance. For a staff member whose base pay is currently high in the salary grade, you might want to have additional discussions about their career development and ways to build skills and broaden job experiences to position themselves for higher level jobs in the future.