

Making the Most of Performance Reviews

Performance reviews are like a rite of passage in the world of work. As employees, supervisors and Managers, we're often involved in them whether we like it or not. But how often do we think about how we can use professional feedback to grow, to encourage, and generally to develop ourselves and our employees?

Manager Tips to Providing Feedback

Firstly, for supervisors and managers it is important to change our perception on feedback, not as a once-a-year review event, but as an opportunity to engage and encourage employees on a regular basis.

Providing feedback is a process in which people share their perceptions about another's behaviour or actions. The goal of feedback is always for the person it's directed at, to both 'receive' and 'use the feedback'. It is one of the most important ways for learning new behaviour and determining the impact of our behaviour on others.

Frequency is the Key

Effective managers know that in order to get the most out of their employees, they need to give them timely feedback all year round.

Frequent feedback gives you the best chance to reinforce positive behaviour and influence changes in acceptable behaviour. It makes it easier to focus on specific behaviours. Timing also means giving feedback privately and when there is time for discussion. Surprise them as much as you can with positive feedback, so that your people don't only think feedback is negative.

Don't give feedback only on exceptionally positive or negative things. Remember to give feedback when they are approaching the goal, not only when they have reached the goal. Make employees aware of potential opportunities and provide steps to achieve their goals.

Regular and frequent feedback puts money in the emotional bank account between people. It also makes it easier to be direct on a performance problem. When trust and respect have been built, it is easier to make a withdrawal from the account. Keep the conversation open-ended, and allow employees to respond to a supervisor's comments. Focus on issues, not people.

Be Specific

It is important to give clear examples of the behaviour or performance that is being discussed. The greater the clarity you have in describing the behaviour, the more the other person will understand it.

Bring examples from past (6-12months) and present states, focussing achievements, goals, significant milestones and work in progress.

Describe behaviour or actions in observable terms rather than using words that may seem to be judgemental. Referring to observable behaviour means dealing in the realm of fact. Using evaluative labels and name calling moves the feedback into the emotional realm and deals with opinions. Mixing fact and opinion often creates communication barriers.

Benefits of Feedback

Providing effective feedback to your team offers great benefits. It's not uncommon to lose sight of how impactful those benefits can be, however, when given at the right time in a respectful, positive and constructive manner, feedback can be the key to both individual and organisational success.

All team members need to know whether their performance measures up.

If there is a performance problem, early feedback can usually solve it before it magnifies into a situation that requires extreme action.

By directly sharing information, you can increase transparency and trust in teams. Teams that regularly share feedback are more predictable, other team members know what to expect, appreciate the predictability, and show less defensiveness, and more respect.

Team members who can be honest in their reactions to others tend to develop stronger interpersonal relationships. While the feedback process can sometimes be trying, the ability to communicate openly leads to a greater commitment in the relationship.

Team members cannot be expected to improve their work quality unless they have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. In addition, positive feedback for excellent performance creates incentives for improved quality of work.



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Effective Feedback Checklist for Managers

- If it is important, make an appointment to give the feedback
- Always make sure the feedback is given in a private, respectful environment
- Keep it simple and be specific when giving feedback
- Keep calm regardless of the response, however know the difference between venting and abusive behavior
- If they get into blaming, don't join in...listen....focus on the issue/behaviour and acknowledge the feelings
- Leverage their strengths
- Offer suggestions and support
- Get their feedback about the feedback
- Have a follow up plan

Tips for Employees

Employees can really make their performance reviews count, as long as they know what to do.

Get Yourself in the Right Mindset

This is most important thing, approach your performance reviews realistically. You don't want it to be a situation where you're going in to brag and really talk yourself up, but it's also not really a place to be humble. Prepare for honest and accurate conversations about your achievements and shortcomings.

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

Conduct a thorough self-evaluation before you meet with your manager. During this self-evaluation, employees should take a careful look at what they have demonstrably achieved in their roles to benefit the organisation.

Pull out your last performance review, and check in with the goals you set until the next one. Ask yourself:

- Did I reach my goals?
- If so, what did I do to reach those goals?
- If I did not reach my goals, why not?

If you did not reach your goals, you should have clear explanations for why not, as well as examples of steps taken to reach the goals which you failed to meet.

Employees should also look at things they might have done for the benefit of the business that weren't part of their goals. Maybe you worked outside your normal role, or switched roles within the company. You should list what you have done in that new role.

After preparing carefully and thoroughly, employees should present the hard evidence they collected during their self-evaluations to demonstrate how they've reached their goals and/or helped the organisation reach theirs.

Ask the Right Questions

Employees should also use performance reviews to ask the right questions of their managers.

Ask your manager direct questions about your performance. Don't be afraid to ask what they think you've done well? Your idea of something you've done well may not be the same as your manager's idea. Likewise, it's also important to ask managers about areas for improvement.

Every manager appreciates whenever you are trying to make yourself better, so you should definitely ask where you can improve. Ask;

- What can I do to make myself better? Are there any areas outside of my day-to-day performance that I can help on?
- Do I have strengths that can be used outside of my own role?

When an employee asks a manager how they can improve, it shows the manager that they are dedicated to giving the best performance they possibly can. These sorts of questions can also bring about valuable feedback which can help you grow in your own career.

Don't Just Set and Forget

Once the performance review is over, use the feedback to consciously improve your performance. Schedule regular follow-up meetings. It's almost impossible to really track your progress if you only talk about it once a year - set reminders to follow up with your manager, even if it's not an official performance review. Go in — at the minimum quarterly, maybe monthly — and have a five-minute conversation with your manager to ask how you're doing. Making sure that you're staying on track will make your next performance review easier.

If You Didn't Do So Well...

Sometimes, an employee will have a poor performance review. It happens. If it's you, frequent follow-up conversations with your manager are even more important.

Write down your goals as soon as you leave the performance review. Keep weekly updates on how you're doing to reach those goals.

Doing this will ensure that you really improve — and have a great performance review next time around.

References:

- Converge International, 2014 'The New Leaders Toolkit - Participant Manual', 15 June 2015.
Matthew Kosinski, *How to Get the Most out of Your Performance Review*, February 20, 2015