

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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Eight Keys to Effective Performance Reviews

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Since managers are charged with the success of the function entrusted to them, it's essential for them to get the strongest possible contribution from every member of their team. Performance reviews are one of the most useful tools in gaining that contribution.

The goal of every performance review is to motivate workers. Even when a worker's recent performance has been below expectations, a carefully conducted review can provide the encouragement to make necessary improvements.

To be effective and successful at conducting personnel performances, managers should follow these guidelines.

1. *Formal performance reviews should be only one element of an on-going dialogue between the manager and the worker about the worker's performance.* That is, managers should have occasional brief, informal interactions with individual workers concerning their performance. In particular, these interactions should address any areas of serious underperformance. If a worker is surprised by a formal review which is negative, the manager has not done sufficient work between reviews of making the worker aware of where performance is falling short.
2. *Feedback should be based around behaviorally-specific language, not around more abstract issues such as attitude or commitment or responsibility.* Instead of saying, "I want to commend you for your level of commitment this past quarter," describe what you observed that signaled commitment to you. You might say, "I want to commend your commitment this past quarter in meeting or beating every deadline, even the most challenging ones."
3. *Performance evaluations should contain a minimum of subjective judgments on the part of the manager.* Whenever possible the conversation should center on specific elements of the worker's job description and on goals and deadlines which have been set for the worker. The performance review should evaluate progress against goals and priorities set in the previous review. And it should set additional goals and priorities for the period leading up to the next review.
4. *At times managers must address behavioral issues that may not permit them to avoid subjective assessments.* In those instances it's important for the manager to describe the issue in terms of concrete, observed behavior. For example, instead of saying, "Your attitude toward your colleagues needs to be improved," the manager might say something like, "Lately, when I hear you making

comments about your colleagues, I often hear a tone of disrespect in your voice." Then zero in on the importance of correcting the disrespectful behavior, not on the importance of having a better attitude toward fellow-workers.

5. *While areas of inadequate performance must be clearly identified and discussed as part of the review, the manager should also make it a point to underscore and commend specific strengths and achievements on the part of the worker.* Be specific in this praise. Workers enjoy hearing, "You're doing a great job." But generalized praise like this does not convey a precise image of what the worker is doing which has led to the manager's upbeat appraisal. A better statement would be, "You've met or exceeded every goal I had for you this past quarter, and I see your example inspiring others to work harder at their own goals."
6. *In cases of serious underperformance, the performance review should not be concluded until the manager and the worker have agreed on a specific plan of action to overcome the shortfall.* The plan should include any steps which the manager is willing to take personally to help the worker carry out the plan. The manager should then express confidence that the worker will be able to make these needed improvements. Remember that performance reviews are meant to be motivating, not discouraging.
7. *Managers should not rely on a verbal performance review exclusively.* Instead, they should prepare a written summary of the review in advance and share it with the worker at the end of the discussion. The manager should have signed and dated the summary, and a space should be provided for the worker's signature, acknowledging that the summary accurately reflects the essence of the manager's review. Commonly the space for the worker's signature also includes a check box which can be used to indicate any personal disagreement with one or more elements of the evaluation.
8. *If, in the course of the review, the manager and worker develop actionable goals or plans which are not in the written summary, the summary needs to be modified accordingly.* The manager should make these amendments soon after the review and make this modified set of expectations available to the worker as a supplement to the summary. This supplement should also be signed by both parties.

To some managers this may all sound like a lot of paperwork and attention to detail. But these are all time-proven strategies. Careful attention to the eight principles in this article will optimize the opportunity for performance reviews to be effective, productive, and motivational.

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