

## Successful Supervisor Part 14

### Performance Management

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Preparing and giving performance reviews has historically been one of the most difficult functions for a supervisor. In this article we will discuss several ways to prevent this important function from being a huge chore and also note some mistakes that inexperienced supervisors often make.

For this article, I will focus on the typical pattern of feeding back performance in an annual review. I recognize that some organizations are moving away from the rather arcane process of an annual performance appraisal, but my observation is that the majority of organizations still use some form of it. If your organization has moved on to more progressive ways to deal with performance feedback, consider yourself fortunate. You may still find some of these tips to be helpful regardless of the pattern your organization uses.

Here are seven tips for creating more constructive and easier performance reviews with employees. Feel free to contact me with other ideas you have on this topic. The potential improvements are almost endless.

#### **1. Create an easier discussion**

The formality of the supervisor's office and a piece of written paper that contains information that has a material impact on the employee's well being (read that "pay") can be terrifying to the person. Some supervisors ask employees to jot down notes in preparation before the performance review is written, so at least the employee has a sense that he or she had some input to the document.

The meeting itself should not be a surprise. Let the employee know at least a day before that you will have a performance review discussion on a specific date and time but don't make it sound like a command performance at the police station. Keep the conversation light and show by your body language that this will be a non-threatening meeting. Say something like this, "The meeting is just a time for me to thank you for your good performance this past year and an opportunity for both of us to explore how you can take the next step."

## **2. Do your homework**

The appraisal must be fact-based and have specific examples for areas where performance improvement is indicated. Make sure the observations are your own, and do not use any information that is hearsay. Don't use a little black book where you jot down notes all year about the sins of the past. People will quickly catch on, and you will lose credibility.

The idea is to have the corrective feedback come via verbal input throughout the year, so there is no need to write down every issue. The exception to this rule is where the problem is large enough or the pattern is habitual, in which case the issue should be documented formally in the employee's personnel file. That way the supervisor doesn't need to remember what was said on any particular day of the year.

## **3. Keep it short**

While the discussion may have a lot of words going back and forth, the actual written detail in the performance review should be succinct. Get the information down and then edit it until it is readable, clear, and easy to digest. Avoid trying to sound professorial by using big or fancy wording. Keep the vocabulary at a level where the person being appraised can understand the written input without referring to a dictionary.

## **4. Show Respect**

Since this input is of critical importance to the employee, give it the proper respect. Make sure your interview does not have any interruptions. Turn off your phone and absolutely refrain from scanning your inbox or cell phone during the conversation. It is also a good idea to refrain from looking at your watch every few minutes. Give every signal possible to demonstrate that the employee is important to you and that the conversation has your highest priority at the moment.

## **5. Watch the Body Language**

The employee will be sending signals constantly that will tell you his or her level of comfort, if you are alert to the signals. Watch for wringing of hands, shifting in the chair, loss of eye contact, sweating, or other signs of anxiety and seek to reduce the anxiety by your words and your own body language.

Be aware that you are also sending body language signals to the employee. Try to keep a pleasant and caring demeanor even when the topic may be challenging. Don't raise your voice even if the employee does. Keep calm and in control by showing a gentle, yet professional facial expression.

## **6. Let the employee talk**

Do not rush through the material and then ask at the end if there are any questions. It is a good idea to pause at several spots to let the employee get a word in edgewise. Seek to have an even level of input from both yourself and the employee. Make sure to listen with high intensity to every word that comes back to you. If the employee wants to refute or mitigate a statement you have written, be sure you document his or her point exactly on the form.

Modulate the pace of the discussion so that it is a natural conversation between two adults. Take the time to consider the feelings of the employee and ask for reactions so you do not create an appearance of rushing through a difficult chore you want to cross off your list for the day.

## **7. Document any points of improvement**

Every performance review ought to have the flavor of a conversation truly aimed at helping the employee. If there are areas of specific improvement, be sure to identify how the employee can make those improvements. There may be a course to take or an article to read. There may be some group work you need to do with the entire team. At the end of the conversation, you want to leave the employee with a feeling of a fair evaluation and a positive path forward.

In addition to these seven tips, there are many things to ***avoid doing*** in a performance review.

### **1. Avoid surprises**

Whenever a person receiving a poor performance review is surprised, it is a sign the supervisor has not been doing her job well all year. Performance feedback is best when there is a continual flow of information in both directions. The employee gets positive reinforcement when things are going well and constructive coaching when things need improvement.

If an employee hears in a performance appraisal for the first time that his tardiness and the number of smoke breaks have been hampering productivity, the supervisor needs some coaching. The first rule of a performance appraisal is that the feedback should be a review of information that has ***already been shared*** specifically along the way.

### **2. Avoid making small talk**

The employee knows he is there for a performance appraisal and is on edge. Trying to make things better by talking about the ball game or the weather does little to make the employee less nervous. It is far better to conduct the interview with a pleasant tone of voice and some friendly body language than to try to make the meeting something it is not. Forget the cotton candy and get down to business, but do it with a smile.

### 3. Avoid using the “Sandwich” Approach

There are numerous courses for supervisors. In most of them, one of the techniques advocated is called the "sandwich" approach. The typical approach when a supervisor has a difficult message to deliver is to start with some kind of positive statement about the employee. This is followed by the improvement opportunity. Finally, the supervisor gives an affirming statement of confidence in the employee. Some people know this method as the C,C,C technique (compliment, criticize, compliment).

The theory behind the sandwich approach is that if you couch your negative implication between two happy thoughts, it will lessen the blow and make the input better tolerated by the person receiving the coaching. The problem is that this method usually does not work, and it often undermines the credibility of the supervisor. Let's examine why this conventional approach, as most supervisors use it, is poor advice.

First, recall when the sandwich technique was used on you. Remember how you felt? Chances are you were not fooled by the ruse. You got the message embodied in the central part of the sandwich, the meat, and mentally discounted the two slices of bread. Why would you do that? After all, there were two positive things being said and only one negative one. The reason is the juxtaposition of the three elements in rapid fire left you feeling the sender was insincere with the first and last element and really only meant the central portion.

The transparency of the sandwich approach makes the employee cringe when he hears the first bit of praise because he can sense there is a “but” coming. In fact, it is a good idea when proofreading a performance appraisal before the interview, scan and eliminate every use of the word but.

It is not *always* wrong to use a balanced set of input, in fact, if done well, it is helpful. If there really is some specific good thing that was done, you can start with that thought. Make the sincere compliment ring true and try to get some dialog on it rather than immediately shoot a zinger at the individual. Then you can bring the conversation to the corrective side carefully. By sharing an idea for improvement, you can give a balanced view that will not seem manipulative or insincere. Everyone's performance is a combination of positive activities and improvement opportunities.

### 4. Avoid the final “pep talk”

Try to avoid the final "pep talk" unless there is something specific that you really want to stress. If that is the case, then it belongs upfront anyway. The supervisor may be tempted to say something like, “With all your skills, I am confident you can solve this little problem so your amazing performance in other areas will shine brighter.” If that

kind of drivel does not cause your employee to throw up on your desk, consider yourself lucky.

The very best advice for any supervisor giving a performance feedback interview is to use the Golden Rule. Just before the meeting, ask yourself how you would like the interview to go if the other person was the supervisor and you were the employee. Being kind and considerate will pay off, and using these do's and don'ts will help, if you remember to use them.

*This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on [www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision](http://www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision) or on this blog.*

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