For many supervisors, performance reviews are viewed with a certain amount of anxiety, particularly when it comes to feedback on performance growth and development opportunities.

It is important to view performance reviews not as a mandatory “time-consuming” exercise, but as a unique opportunity to improve the performance of your team.

In short, your employees should leave their reviews with a clear idea of their strengths, a plan for development and growth, and clearly defined goals and expectations for their role.

This guide takes a closer look at:

* Important Steps for Preparing for Performance Reviews
* Tips for Writing Effective Performance Reviews
* Best Practices for Conducting the Review Meeting
Effective Performance Reviews are a process that begins well before the Annual Performance Review “season” begins.

Establish Healthy Employee Relationships

The aspect of the review process that has the greatest impact on employee performance is the employee’s perception of your relationship. If you are viewed as inconsistent, unfair, or if an employee is dissatisfied with you in general, your feedback, regardless of quality or intent, will likely have little impact. It is therefore imperative that you establish healthy relationships with your team.

Key Point To Remember:
The messenger matters as much as the message.

Clearly Explain Performance Standards

Nothing in the formal review should truly be a surprise to your employees. At the very least, they should know exactly the criteria you will be using to gauge their performance. Clearly communicating employee performance goals, reduces the “surprise” factor and increases the

Key Point To Remember:
Clearly and explicitly state performance criteria to your employees before you begin assessing

Provide Coaching & Feedback

The very nature of the review process timeline—once a year—makes coaching and informal feedback a necessity. No supervisor can afford to wait five to ten months to reinforce performance strengths or to correct performance lapses. In fact, immediate feedback on its own also has a positive impact on employee performance. Furthermore, informal feedback along the way means that your employees

Key Point To Remember:
Provide immediate informal feedback along
Planning for the Review

For a performance review to be effective, one of the first things to do – is to plan. Good reviews are rarely thrown together at the last minute. Ideally, they include not only supervisor input on employee performance but employee self-assessment as well. Having these completed ahead of time and reviewing them gives you a good idea of which parts of the conversation will be “easy” (e.g., where you agree) and where there may be some difficulty.

The Importance of Delivering Review Feedback Effectively

Studies suggest that employees report widespread dissatisfaction with their performance management programs. Supervisors often avoid giving feedback to their direct reports since they lack the confidence or do not know how to deliver effective performance feedback. In effect, if executed well, delivering a performance review and focusing on the right type of feedback can impact employee performance by more than 25%.

Gather verifiable performance examples
Understand results/goals and actions to achieve the results
Identify strengths and weaknesses to discuss
Develop suggestions to improve weaknesses
Expect negative reactions and clarifications/questions

Use “GUIDE” to Deliver Feed-

“By failing to prepare you are preparing to fail.”
- Ben Franklin
Prepare and Rehearse

Prior to delivering formal feedback to your team, prepare for the discussion and run through the conversation.

Rehearsing the conversation is important, particularly for the key messages you want to cover.

Preparation time is time well spent; how an employee reacts to feedback will be dependent on the relationship you share and also on how well you deliver the feedback.

Ask the Employee to Complete a Self-Assessment

Ask each member of your team to review the goals for the previous year and reflect on whether or not the goals have been met. Also encourage them to identify goals they would like to achieve for the coming year.

Rehearse the Flow of the Discussion

Rehearse conversations and key messages before reviews take place. Rehearsing the conversation is important, particularly for the section where you are providing feedback on performance growth opportunities.

Decide the Employee’s Performance Strengths

Emphasizing the positive in the performance review can have a substantial impact on the employee’s performance; emphasis on performance strengths in formal reviews has the maximum (36%) impact on employee performance. Consequently, begin by highlighting the strengths; think about instances to reinforce important behaviors.

Identify Suggestions for Development and Growth

When discussing development and growth opportunities, you should frame feedback as ways to overcome barriers to higher performance, not personal weakness.
Focus on Strengths to Deliver Impactful Feedback

Focus on delivering feedback in such a way that employees gain useful information that will improve their performance in the future. Feedback can be enhanced by following these suggestions:

- Focus on positive accomplishments (performance and personality strengths), not failures or mistakes
- Avoid judgmental comments
- Balance criticism with positive feedback (2 positives for each negative)
- Be objective, not subjective
- Focus on performance, not personal characteristics
- Keep a positive attitude
- Listen to the employee’s reaction and comments
- Offer solutions to problems

Evaluate Performance and Behaviors — Not Personality

When Describing Performance:

- Be specific.
- Use action verbs.
- Provide examples.

Example:

Non-Specific, No Examples

“Completes work on time and to satisfaction.”

Don’t Forget To Add In The Employee’s Name

Example:

Specific, Examples of Observed Behaviors and Feedback

“John demonstrates a high level of professionalism, by ensuring all projects are completed by deadline. In fact, on our most complex project this year, he was able to complete the work one week prior to deadline. John always receives positive feedback from other departments.”
Rating Pitfalls To Avoid

A few cognitive and perceptive problems often cause the “rater” to make errors in assessing employees. Being aware of these pitfalls can make the process more objective and could also reduce rating bias.

**Halo / Horn Effect**
Halo / Horn effect occurs when a rater attaches too much significance to a single factor of performance.

**Tendency Bias**
Raters differ in their tendency to evaluate people or performance. Some supervisors are very strict or conservative in their ratings and generally give low scores in their evaluations. Others either rate their

**Recency Bias**
Performance reviews involve assessment of employee performance for a specific period. People may not perform uniformly throughout that period due to numerous factors. Often, recent events tend to

**Contrast Effect**
When supervisors rate employees one after another, rating of an exceptional performer or a very poor performer could affect the subsequent ratings of other individuals.

**Personal Bias**
Personal beliefs, assumptions, preferences, and lack of understanding about a person can lead to an unfair evaluation.
Ensure the Right Setting

If you have done your job at preparation and planning, you will be off to a good start when facilitating the review meeting.

To deliver formal feedback, choose a quiet, private location and allow enough time to discuss the review. That said, don’t forget to include time for the employee to understand and respond to the review, and share concerns openly with you.

1. Establish the Proper Climate
   - Schedule the meeting in advance and stick to it.
   - Allow enough time to discuss the review.
   - Locate a private space and guard against interruptions.

2. Make It Clear That This Is A Joint Discussion
   - Listen and ask for the employee’s opinion.
   - Avoid words or body language that criticize the employee’s view.

3. Discuss Goals and Performance for the Review Period
   - Review whether the goals were met.
   - Discuss performance strengths and weaknesses and provide examples of observed behaviors and actions.
   - Make sure that weaknesses are not the only emphasis of the discussion.
   - Discuss obstacles and roadblocks that affect goal achievement.

4. Discuss Opportunities For Growth and Development in the Current Role or a Different Role
   - Discuss the employee’s development and career goals.
   - Provide solutions and development plans for growth opportunities discussed.
Managing Negative Employee Reactions to Feedback

The Importance of Understanding and Identifying Employee Reactions

Fear of how an employee will respond is one of the key reasons supervisors avoid, delay, and often completely abandon performance conversations.

Delivering performance feedback elicits a range of different employee responses. Understanding these reactions, especially negative reactions, and ways to handle them helps you be more candid and timely in providing valuable feedback.

Common Employee Reactions to Constructive Performance Feedback

Listed below are negative employee responses that often arise during performance review delivery. You should be aware of the following reactions and handle them carefully:

* **Hostility/Resistance/Denial** — Employees do not acknowledge the issue, deny that the incidents took place, or downplay the impact of their actions; often attacking your credibility and the facts in the review.

* **Indifference** — Employees react to the feedback in an apathetic manner and do not fully commit to doing things differently.

* **Lack of Confidence/Self Pity** — Employees are uncertain in their abilities to succeed or take risks to grow.

* **Responsibility Skirting** — Employees may acknowledge the negative feedback but may play the ‘blame game,’ indirectly implying that they will not change.

* **Shock/Anger** — Employees become angry and say things impulsively or react in an emotional way.

Tips to Minimize Negative Reactions

To reduce negative reactions, use precise language with sufficient examples to support the feedback. In addition, actively gauge the employee emotions and respond accordingly.

- **Phrase the Feedback Accurately**
  - Ensure you use simple words and supporting examples to deliver formal and informal feedback.

- **Allow the Employee to Speak Openly and Do Not Interrupt**
  - Let your direct report vent his/her feelings about the feedback. Make the employee feel heard.

- **Observe Signs of Emotional Reactions**
  - Observe the employee’s choice of words, tone, and facial expressions to assess the level of stress or anger.

- **Remain Calm, Composed, and Handle the Situation with Care**
  - If the employee acts shocked, aggressive, or defensive, maintain your composure. Be calm and composed in your response.

### Common Employee Reactions to Constructive Feedback and Appropriate Supervisor Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee Reaction</th>
<th>Sample Employee Statement</th>
<th>Guidelines for Supervisor Response</th>
<th>Sample Supervisor Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Hostility**     | “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I provide great customer service!” I do not accept your feedback regarding my project management skills. The incident you cited did not take place.” | **Do:**  
✓ Provide sufficient examples to support your feedback  
✓ Gauge the employee’s reasons for resistance  
✓ Ask the employee to reflect on the feedback and end the discussion if the employee is being pointlessly resistant  
✓ Candidly discuss the consequences if the employee does not address the development area  
✓ Refer the employee to the employee assistance program (EAP), if appropriate  

**Don’t:**  
× Get aggravated with the employee’s open hostility and resistance to your feedback  
× Soften your feedback to alleviate the reaction  
× Attack the employee’s personality based on his/her reaction  |
|                   |                           | “Let’s review the examples I gave of areas where I see an opportunity for improvement.”  |
|                   |                           | “Let’s give you some time to reflect on the feedback I’ve provided and reconnect tomorrow morning.”  |
|                   |                           | “This is an opportunity for you to improve your performance. Disregarding it will continue to impact your performance reviews down the line, as well as the future opportunities available to you here at the organization.”  |

| **Indifference** | “Maybe; I’ll see what I can do.” “I can’t make any promises, but I’ll try.” “Sure, whatever you say.” | **Do:**  
✓ Ask the employee to reflect on the development areas and confirm whether he/she is able to commit to them  
✓ Discuss the consequences of denial if the employee does not commit to improving  

**Don’t:**  
× Overlook the employee’s indifference and non-commitment toward the feedback  
× Lose patience with the employee  
× Judge the employee for being apathetic  |
|                   |                           | “I’d like you to think about what we discussed and whether it’s something you can put the required effort toward developing.”  |
|                   |                           | “It’s important to let me know if this isn’t something you can make a full commitment to. If you decide it’s something you can’t do then that’s acceptable, but then we’ll need to talk about the consequences.”  |

© 2011 CEB. All Rights Reserved.

Resker, Jamie, “10 Most Common Responses to Performance Feedback and How to Respond to Them,” Northeast Human Resources Association (Date Unknown).  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee Reaction</th>
<th>Sample Employee Statement</th>
<th>Guidelines for Supervisor Response</th>
<th>Sample Supervisor Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of Confidence Self-Pity</strong></td>
<td>“I don’t know where to start from.” “I knew this would happen; I can never do anything correctly.”</td>
<td>Do: ✓ Give the employee time alone to regain composure, if necessary ✓ Assure the employee that improvement is possible with effort—use past examples of his/her successful development ✓ Reassure him/her that you will offer support ✓ Provide examples of small steps the employee can take toward improvement ✓ Refer the employee to the employee assistance program (EAP), if appropriate</td>
<td>“Now that we have identified this area for development, it is an opportunity for you to improve your performance. I firmly believe you are capable of achieving this goal. I’ve seen you achieve similar development goals in the past, for example…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t ✗ Focus on the employee’s past inability to achieve outcomes ✗ Moderate your feedback to alleviate the reaction ✗ Reflect the employee’s negative attitude</td>
<td>“You will have support from me as you work on this. For example…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsibility Skirting</strong></td>
<td>“It’s not my fault…” “I’m sorry, but when people ask such basic questions it is very annoying.”</td>
<td>Do: ✓ Listen to the employee's reasons and situation ✓ Restate the examples ✓ Clarify that the employee will need to meet expectations and improve the development areas despite his/her reasons</td>
<td>“Let’s talk about what you can do to improve in this area.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t ✗ Agree with the employee when he/she blames other people ✗ Change your perspective based on the reasons or excuses if they are not valid</td>
<td>“I know this might be difficult for you to focus on, but the fact remains that I need you to work productively with your peers.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I know there have been a lot of changes recently, but I still need you to support the change and impact our overall customer service rating.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Common Employee Reactions to Constructive Feedback and Appropriate Supervisor Responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee Reaction</th>
<th>Sample Employee Statement</th>
<th>Guidelines for Supervisor Response</th>
<th>Sample Supervisor Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shock</strong></td>
<td>“This is not fair! I always knew you didn’t like me, but this is unreasonable.”</td>
<td>✓ Acknowledge the fact that the employee is not satisfied with the feedback</td>
<td>“I can see that you are upset with these results. I would like to hear your opinion.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>I’ve been working so hard to meet all of my project deadlines, and this is what I get to hear?”</em></td>
<td>✓ Ask the employee for opinions and comments</td>
<td>“If I understand correctly, you are angry because you feel that I have not given you enough challenging assignments, and that I don’t have any confidence in your abilities. Is that correct?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>“I was expecting a promotion and I think I deserve it.”</em></td>
<td>✓ Restate examples, explain your perspective</td>
<td>“Let me explain what I think happened so you can understand my opinion. Then we can work this out together.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anger</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓ Refer the employee to the employee assistance program (EAP), if appropriate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Don’t</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Attack the employee’s personality based on his/her reaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Become defensive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✗ Moderate your feedback to alleviate the reaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
