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Performance Management and Appraisal, Feedback

PAINLESS

PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

BY MARY MAVIS

Most managers shrink from their most important task—managing the performance of others. Here's how to turn a painful task into a productive one.

"Well, I think that covers it!" Sheila says, wrapping up Tom's annual performance review. "Do you have any other questions? No?... Good. I hope you don't take my criticism personally. Just make the changes we talked about, and you'll be fine."

Sheila believes that Tom leaves the meeting understanding her evaluation. But that night, Tom tells his wife that Sheila did not explain clearly her expectations for his performance or recommend specific ways that Tom can improve.

"What does she mean, I'm 'not efficient enough'? What can I do to improve?" Tom asks rhetorically. He shakes his head, feeling a familiar sense of irritation. "I just don't know what she wants from me," he says. "How can I improve when I don't know the standard for success? I really feel criticized."

Meanwhile, Sheila is telling her husband that she is relieved that the conversation with Tom went so smoothly. "I hate review time," she confides. "I never know how to talk with my people about problems, especially if the person is a 'keeper' who never forgets anything said to him. Besides, I've never even had a performance review from any of my bosses!"

Most people don't like feedback. They don't like to give it or receive it. Not surprisingly, many organizations neglect the performance-review process.

But lean organizations can't afford poor performers, and workers can't afford poor reviews. More than ever, employees need and expect useful feedback. Both supervisors and subordinates need to communicate comfortably and clearly during a review.

Because employees often perceive their supervisors as dishing out feedback but not taking it, they don't realize that giving feedback is difficult. Managers may relish a review when they can heap praise on a high performer. But when they must discuss an employee's shortcomings, the process becomes painful.

Why are even experienced managers so reluctant to conduct performance reviews? Usually for the following reasons:

- People avoid conflict—real and perceived.
- People don't want to take responsibility for their judgments.
- People are more certain of their judgments than of their facts.
- People are afraid that if they start giving clear, serious feedback, they also will receive candid feedback on their own performance.

In short, few people learn from life experience alone how to give and receive feedback well. Nevertheless, managers can't cede their responsibility to maximize employees' performance. So, most managers have to develop their feedback skills.

Managers can improve the process by learning to think differently about feedback. By focusing on the key

Illustration by Lonni Sue Johnson


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principles of effective feedback, managers can learn to

- validate feedback they offer to their employees
- observe employees' behavior and compare it to performance expectations
- attain peace of mind before, during, and after their feedback meetings.

The Four Elements of Feedback

Observations	**Assessments**	**Consequences**	**Development**
Missed the Friday deadline four times out of six.	Undependable in meeting deadlines. Standard: missing one or two deadlines might be excused, but four is a signal of a problem.	Transfer to another job if late again. Reputation for lack of dependability within any new job at the company.	Meet deadline on time. Plan: Schedule next production with manager and identify any sources of delay. Check in with manager at milestones.
Screamed at team member and team member left the room.	Unprofessional behavior with team member. Standard: Volume of voice must be within speaking level. While using an emphatic tone is acceptable, screaming is not.	Lack of employee and company respect. Reduction in bonus.	Must lower voice to acceptable volume and speak in a non-attacking manner. Plan: Coaching from manager regarding issues behind behavior.
Developed new design on time, within budget, and above industry standard.	Dependable and highly effective in program design. Standard: Program designs are expected on time. Most people meet industry standards, but few exceed them.	Opportunity for next challenging project. Recognition among peers and across department heads.	No improvement needed; however, suggest develop presentation for industry conference. Plan: Work with marketing to develop materials.

Key principles

Effective feedback rests on three underlying principles.

Feedback takes two. Feedback takes place only during a two-way conversation in which both the parties speak openly and listen to each other's point of view. Written communication is inherently one-sided. Until we engage in conversation, we only can hope the person understands our message.

Feedback brings reality into focus. Feedback is a dynamic process that brings together two people, each with his or her own worldview, personal and professional history, and value system.

To create change, managers must understand how their employees perceive events and why they act as they do. They must remain open to employees' ideas for self-improvement. Managers who "tell" their employees how they are doing miss valuable feedback themselves. For instance, poor results that a manager attributes to an employee's carelessness might be caused by a problem with a particular process.

Good intentions matter. Managers must clarify their intentions for feedback. To evaluate others effectively, managers must genuinely want to help them. Otherwise, the exchange will run into emotional barriers and produce only rote or uninspired ideas for improvements.

Suppose an employee's poor performance has disrupted the department. The manager, sounding irritated, discusses the issue with the employee. The manager's unspoken message—"You have made me look bad, and I resent you for it"—drowns out the verbal feedback that could help the person correct the problem.

Managers can put those three principles into action by addressing four key elements when they prepare for and conduct performance reviews:

- observations—neutral facts or occurrences
- assessments—personal interpretations of a set of observed behavior
- consequences—possible or certain effects of continued behavior
- development—suggestions for improvement.

Observations

Managers must ground all feedback in discrete observations of behavior or results. For example, a manager might observe, "Sara did not deliver the report to me by the Friday noon deadline."

Observation holds the key to resolving any confusion about an employee's job performance. When employees disagree, question, or react emotionally to feedback, managers should restate the observations that initially prompted the feedback.

Observations shared by both the manager and employee form a foundation of facts on which to base assessments. ("Before we get into a general assessment, Sara, let's talk about what I've observed and what you remember about the project's execution.")

Observations make feedback "real" for employees and give them a chance to clarify their viewpoints. For example, if a manager says an employee lacks decisiveness, the manager should support the assessment with a specific instance in which the employee failed to make a timely decision. The employee then might elaborate on the circumstances. ("I could not act because purchasing could not provide the quotes to me before Monday.") The additional information might then prompt the manager to revise his or her original assessment.

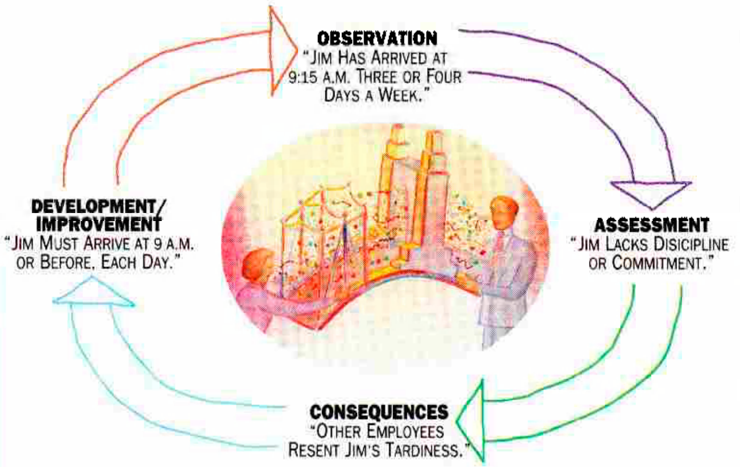
Assessments

Many managers lack confidence in their assessments of employees. An assessment is a value judgment based on some standard. But, consciously or not, we often pass off our assessments as observations. ("We don't have enough work to keep the business going.")

For example, a manager might say to Sara, "You do not manage your time efficiently." This statement implies that the manager not only knows all the facts, but also knows the reason for the unacceptable results. Without explicitly linking an assessment to an observation, managers risk confusing, angering, or demoralizing employees.

The Feedback Process

Four elements—observation, assessment, consequences, and development—make up the model for effective feedback.



In real life, the process does not always flow in this orderly way. The feedback process can start or end with any of these elements. But most feedback conversations begin with an assessment and then address the other three elements as follows:

Manager: "John, your recent work has been outstanding." (Assessment)

John: "Thank you. Are you referring to any particular project or results?"

Manager: "Yes, your analysis on ACME produced four key solutions for the project." (Observation)

John: "Was there anything I could have done better?"

Manager: "There were no real problems. In the future, you might want to communicate your results sooner. (Development) I plan to recommend you for a promotion." (Consequence)

Moreover, people assess the same situation very differently, depending on their outlook and experience. Suppose a technical specialist writes an internal report summarizing a major project. That specialist's manager, who has a strong background in technical writing, finds the report too formal. It doesn't "tell a story," he contends. But a manager in the finance department commends the report as easy to read; she likes the way that the specialist highlighted the project's data.

Each manager measured the same report against a different standard. Numerous factors influence managers' personal standards, such as how they were reared, where they live, and how much they earn. Managers also are influenced by their industry, professional specialty, and the organizational culture of their workplace.

Managers must gain insight into the conscious and unconscious standards they apply when they assess employees. Whether giving feedback formally or informally, managers must ask themselves, "What personal standards am I using to make this assessment?" The answer often prompts a manager to alter his or her assessment.

Managers also must consider companywide standards for behavior and performance.

Suppose an employee strongly disagrees with his or her boss in front of other managers and staff. The way the boss assesses the employee's behavior (a public challenge) will depend on the boss's personal experience and style for dealing with conflict.

But the manager also must consider whether the organization as a whole has a standard for acceptable interpersonal communication. Some organizations encourage frank and spontaneous give-and-take, regardless of the status of the parties involved or who is present. Others value a standard of "always support your boss in public," and leave challenges to the privacy of the boss's office.

Many organizational standards are implicit. Unable to articulate the standards, many managers fall back on catch phrases, such as "You didn't push the thinking far enough," or "You haven't paid your dues." Such statements are open to as many interpretations as a company has employees.

To ensure that feedback prompts desirable action, managers must make sure that employees understand the assessment. If a manager says, "I think you are overwhelmed," he or she should clearly explain what "overwhelmed" means in this context.

Consequences

All actions have consequences—some desirable, and some undesirable. For the person being assessed, some negative consequences could include termination or a job transfer. Positive consequences might include a promotion or a bonus.

Consequences vary from person to person, even if the feedback different employees receive is similar. For example, a research analyst with poor oral-communication skills might face less serious consequences for lack of improvement than a salesperson or receptionist with the same problem.

Unfortunately, during feedback, manager and employee usually forget to discuss the known or possible consequences of a given action. So each party leaves the discussion with his or her own idea of implied consequences, but with few actual facts about consequences.

Managers don't have to cite consequences for every item of feedback they offer, but they should cover important consequences. When managers make consequences clear, employees can answer the following questions after an evaluation:

- "Will I be fired if I don't perform an action, or will I be promoted if I do?"
- "Are my working relationships at risk, or are they likely to grow?"
- "If I develop certain skills, will I have opportunities for new assignments?"
- "Will I lose opportunities if I don't change certain behaviors?"

From a manager's perspective, there are three types of consequences:

- those they can enforce
- those they have seen occur in similar situations
- those they imagine possible.

Managers often are reluctant to state consequences when they cannot enforce them. But managers can give employees useful information by explaining that the conversation will cover possible—not certain—consequences.

This approach opens the door for considering a range of possible consequences. For example, a manager might suggest that an employee cultivate a better relationship with his or her colleagues. If the employee ultimately fails to do so, the consequences might include the loss of a promotion, a tarnished reputation, loss of respect from co-workers, or simply an inability to operate efficiently.

Employees do not have to accept or agree with their managers' view of potential consequences, and managers should not try to convince them, unless of course they have the power and intent to fire or promote them outright.

Even then, a manager rarely should present a consequence as an ultimatum. ("If you don't make these changes, you will be fired!") If an employee feels threatened, he or she will resist or defend against the threat rather than focusing on improvement. The manager should consider the intent carefully and explain the consequence as a fact or a possibility. ("We need you to make these changes to fulfill your job requirements. Let's talk about whether you want to put the effort into the improvement and how we can assist you.")

Development

People need time and help to grow and develop. Helping an employee identify a goal for improvement and a solid plan for achieving the goal is an often overlooked part of the feedback process.

An improvement plan must identify a specific result, a target date for achieving the result, and steps the employee will take to achieve the goal.

If a manager can't picture a desired result, he or she has no right to give the feedback. Just as a manager must observe specifically what an employee's behavior lacks, the manager must specify the behaviors that constitute a successful performance.

From time to time, a manager might wonder exactly what he or she wants from an employee. In that case, the manager should refer to his or her observations to determine what the employee should change. For example, a manager might say, "I observed that Sara missed the deadline on Friday. I want her not only to meet the noon deadline, but also to submit her first draft to me 24 hours earlier so that I have time to add my perspective."

A manager who still cannot envision the desired performance should ask the employee for help. How might the employee work more effectively? What solution might fit her or his style? People often have the answers themselves.

This approach also reveals whether the person understood the feedback. If not, manager and employee together must clarify the assessment before focusing again on the manager's expectations for the employee's performance.

When managers offer suggestions for improvement, they should not expect people to accept their ideas wholeheartedly. With their employees, managers must explore alternatives so that the affected employee owns the solution. Managers can share remedies that have worked for them, that they have seen work for others, or that others recommend, but they can't force them on employees. People have the right to decline suggestions. If they don't have the leeway to do so in front of their managers, they certainly will follow their hearts and minds after they leave the room.

Once managers master the basics of effective feedback, they can enjoy the peace of mind that comes with saying what they mean, meaning what they say, and helping employees perform to the best of their abilities. ■

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