



# "THE TROUBLE WITH YOU IS . . ."

## TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

**SO** you've survived the holiday rush and are now planning for the coming year. It's important to align staff with plans and this is best achieved with the conversations that managers and employees dread most: performance reviews.

The key is to remember that these are just like any other conversation you might have with employees. You are simply sharing information and perspectives to generate clear and purposeful action towards the goals of the business. It need not be too formal – formality can lead to anxiety, which reduces the effectiveness of the conversation – and there should be equal contribution from the supervisor and employee.

Here are a few more basic principles to make reviews as effective (and painless) as possible:

**Throw away the form:** Most people get very focused on filling in the review form or making sure they are interpreting the form correctly. Many managers use the form as a way to avoid preparing or to blame HR for what they have to say. Fill in the form after the conversation as a record. Do not make it the purpose of the conversation.

**Keep it simple:** The best review processes let people know what to expect and allow them to prepare properly without reading a 20-page manual! A structure I have seen work really well boils the whole review down to three questions: What worked? What can be improved? What is our focus for the next year and quarter?

**Focus on the future and opportunities:** There is little value in dwelling on past problems or challenges unless the information can be used to improve future performance. Keep your conversation focused on how things can change and improve and the opportunities ahead rather than a post mortem of past actions. Only give feedback on things that can change – telling someone they are too short is going to lose you a lot of credibility and engagement. Explaining the impact of the errors that occur when the specials list is not checked may get you the result you want.

**Let the employee lead:** Often employees are harsher critics of their own performance than their supervisors. If not, it sets a useful expectation to ask them to do a self review before they meet with you. Instead of working out how to say what you want, prepare really good questions and find out how aware the employee is of their performance. You can gain more from a developing

employee who is aware of their capabilities than an average employee who thinks he is a star.

I have shared this trick with countless managers and on several occasions they followed up surprised and overjoyed at the impact of the question technique. Each of them had an employee where they had tried on repeated occasions to tell them how to act differently, e.g. "You need to check the order before you send it." By asking questions and having the employee come to this answer for him or herself, managers found the employee actually changed behaviour rather than continuing on in the same old vein.

**Only one improvement at a time:** This is a useful rule when it comes to those tough conversations. Some supervisors use the review as an opportunity to unload all of their frustrations at once. This will not lead to a change in behaviour. People struggle to change more than one habit at a time so if you have an employee who is not

meeting expectations, focus on improving the most important activity – ignore the rest until you have success in this area.

**Start and finish with a link to the business:** Say, "Our goal is to increase sales by 10 per cent this year. You can help us achieve that by continuing to be prompt and helpful to customers." People perform best when they know the big picture and they feel like what they do makes a difference.

If you achieve nothing else through your performance conversations, make sure your people know their work is appreciated. This will translate into customer satisfaction, which is linked to increased sales. It is the soft side of business but it has very tangible results. **GT**

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