

The Essential Performance Review Handbook

By Sharon Armstrong

How to Prepare

Know your own employee or your supervisor. If you're an employee whose supervisor doesn't often open the door, take the initiative yourself and make an appointment to talk to him or her periodically. Angst comes when the performance review is the single time, or just one of few times, that supervisors and employees sit down together during the year. ... Optimally, a performance evaluation wraps up a series of informal discussions held throughout the year, serving as a springboard to move forward with new ideas, improved performance, and perhaps more responsibility.

Knowing your supervisor or employee means being better able to anticipate his or her reaction to your comments, and then "managing" your responses to generate positive results. Managers' effectiveness is significantly influenced by insight into their own work. Those who can be introspective about their work are likely to be effective at their jobs. Employees seek not just success but also gratification.

Demonstrate respect and confidentiality. How, when, and even whether appraisals are conducted send a strong message. When a supervisor delays appraisals, does them on the fly, allows interruptions during the review session, doesn't have paperwork complete, or generally doesn't demonstrate that the evaluation is a priority, an employee may feel that he or she isn't, either. If an employee shows up late, participates only half-heartedly, takes no initiative in goal-setting and sits waiting only for compensation information, the supervisor concludes that he or she doesn't care about doing the job well or improving. Respectful interaction during the appraisal reflects the quality of day-to-day work life. Setting aside sufficient uninterrupted time, in a private setting, is key. Confidentiality is too. Only those with a need to know should be privy to the conversation or the form.

Don't prejudge. Our first impressions of others are automatic, largely unnoticed by our conscious minds. Past experiences, needs and wishes, and assumptions about the context in which we encounter new people all greatly influence what information we absorb and how we interpret it. Research indicates that even after months of regular interaction roughly two-thirds of our first impressions remain unchanged. The hiring process alone does not give supervisors and employees the opportunity to know each other well, and upfront impressions can be frozen or misplaced without continuing, two-way feedback.

Keep messages clear and direct. Know when something needs to be said; then, based on solidly documented examples, be sure you relay it accurately. Never assume that supervisors or employees know what you think, want, or need. Not being direct can be costly. Hints are often misinterpreted or ignored. Keeping messages clear depends on

awareness, knowing what you have observed, and knowing how you have reacted to it, especially since what we see and hear externally is so easily confused with what we think and feel inside. Separating these elements will go a long way toward communicating clearly and directly.

A straight message is one in which the stated purpose is identical with the real purpose of the communication. Disguised intentions and hidden agendas are manipulative. Check whether your messages are straight by asking:

- Why am I saying this to this person?
- Is this what I want him or her to hear, or something else?

You'll know quickly whether the points you're highlighting need to be clarified, strengthened, or scrapped.

Review job description. Make sure there is a written job description and that it's accurate and up-to-date. If not, the supervisor should write one, with input from the employee, before the evaluation session so it can be discussed and used for the next review cycle. Along with goals, the job description is a key basis for gauging performance effectiveness and for ensuring that organizational and departmental needs, and supervisor and employee expectations, are on the same track. Perhaps new responsibilities have been added over the review cycle, or there's interest in adding them. There may be recent team or work group initiatives that should be integrated. Employees are the people most aware of on-the-job responsibilities that are not in their job descriptions. Making sure they're included helps measure employee workloads and assess the need to develop new skills for performing new tasks.

Track performance year-round. Keep a folder handy to toss in quick notes as the year progresses – including positive observations, others' feedback, memos, award notices, emails, and other items that pertain to work performance. It's important to keep the folder active, not just one you dust off yearly. Use it as a basis for regular ongoing discussion. Doing this may seem time-consuming, but it's much easier, more productive, and more fair than having to draw on your memory once a year. An appraisal at the end of a work cycle works much better as a recap with recognition, or as an opportunity to stimulate improvement plans, than as a surprise that can make both supervisors and employees uncomfortable. Not having specific examples to support your ratings can also lead to legal problems.

Stay up-to-date on organizational goals. Know what's going on in your organization. Effectively tying job description and goals to broader needs requires a good grasp of organizational direction and changes. Be prepared to factor what is newly needed and/or desired into ongoing responsibilities. When supervisors don't share information with staff, misinformation flies freely and morale can plummet. Employees should feel comfortable asking questions and offering to pitch in on new initiatives, even if supervisors seldom initiate discussion.

Consider the ground rules. If you're a supervisor, should there be ground rules for performance reviews? Does your organization mandate any? If not, perhaps it should. Ground rules might cover ensuring two-way conversation, setting guidelines for goal-setting and problem-solving, applying techniques to stay on track, developing standards for addressing conflict, and delaying talk about compensation for a timely follow-up session.

If you are an employee being appraised, the ground rules are more informal but nonetheless important – and up to you to implement. The most productive appraisals are clear, open two-way discussions. Honesty and clarity, bolstered by written examples, are fair expectations, but may require some added determination if your work climate does not really invite openness.

Follow up promptly with compensation discussion. Thoughts about compensation inevitably shadow the appraisal session. That should come after the appraisal, whether or not during the same session. This precludes the tendency of employees to bring up examples of stellar performance and explain away anything that may take away from a raise. The meeting can turn into a battle of explanation and defense rather than an open discussion of performance and how it can be improved.

Preparation Pays Off

Make sure to review:

- Your organization's strategic plan.
- Updated job description.
- Evaluation form/rating structure.
- Previous performance appraisal.
- Personnel file documentation.
- Goals for current review cycle.
- Preliminary appraisal recommendations – positive and/or negative aspects.
- Documented examples, including letters of praise and award information.
- As needed, suggestions for improvement, such as training, Performance Improvement Plan.
- List of questions.
- Anticipated reaction and how to best respond.

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