

EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

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The following is a partial excerpt from the Manager's Manual section of Lauren Bernardi's book: "***Powerful Employment Policies***".

Performance Management Is More Than Just Filling Out A Form

The goal of performance management is to encourage employee excellence and productivity. You do this by providing feedback on what the employee is doing well, so that he or she can duplicate it, as well as by identifying those areas on which the employee needs to improve.

As a manager you will, no doubt, be evaluated on your ability to provide meaningful feedback and guidance to the people who report to you.

Too often managers view performance management as a review form that you fill out once a year and forget about. But the form is quite possibly the least significant part. Performance management is a continuous process that has three key components:

- evaluating employees on their past performance;
- planning future performance through goal setting and creating improvement targets; and
- coaching and reinforcing employees to help them meet their goals.

The day-to-day management of employees must do the bulk of the work. Your employees need constant feedback about how they are doing, and they need your support to help them improve on areas in which they may be weak.

You do not do anyone any favours by simply leaving them alone and ignoring them. This is particularly true with top performers. Too often, we leave them alone, because we know that they're doing a good job. What we don't want is top performers who become discouraged because they never hear any words of praise or acknowledgement for a job well done and seek work elsewhere.

Completing the Evaluation Form

When it's time for the formal, written evaluation, take care in how you complete the form.

Do not rate everyone the same or excessively high just because you don't want to upset anyone. The best way to help employees excel is to provide them with candid feedback and specific examples.

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Be prepared before you start completing the form

First, consider the employee's performance during the entire period. There is a common tendency to think only about what has happened in the month before the evaluation. This is not necessarily an accurate reflection of the employee's overall performance.

Keep ongoing notes about the employee's performance and ask yourself, at least once a week, whether you have given your employees as much feedback as possible. This can mean telling people that they have done a good job, or it can mean correcting problems before they become even greater challenges for the employee to overcome.

Review the employee's personnel file, which you should keep up to date at all times. This should contain things like discipline notices and any memos about work that has been done well.

Consider each performance element independently

Consider each performance element independently of the others. Someone may be very good at time management but not so good at customer service. Make sure that you distinguish each point.

Get other perspectives

Getting other perspectives is helpful. If you share supervision of an employee with another manager, the other manager's input is essential.

Consider the employee's level of experience

You should be able to expect more from someone who has been doing their job for ten years than from someone who is a new graduate with very little work experience.

Make sure you can defend your ratings

One of the most common questions asked by an employee in a performance evaluation meeting is, "Why?" Employees want examples, and specific information about why you've given a particular rating, especially if the rating is outside the norm. Be prepared with examples to help the employee understand why you have given that rating.

Don't let personal feelings unduly influence you

Do not allow your personal feelings to influence your evaluation of the individual. Just because you happen to like someone and enjoy going for lunch with him or her does not necessarily make that person a good worker. Take a step back and ask yourself about the employee's performance on the job.

Provide constructive feedback

The object of a performance evaluation is to provide your staff with constructive, not destructive, feedback.

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Using constructive feedback is important because it:

- helps employees to better understand what you expect from them;
- creates a climate for successful job performance; and
- is reinforcing rather than defeating.

Make useful comments

Constructive feedback will provide you with much better results. To create constructive feedback, make sure your comments are:

Specific. Use concrete examples. This requires you to observe the employee's behaviour and take notes at all times, not just when a performance evaluation is due.

Balanced. Comment on those aspects of the performance that were strong or reasonable, as well as those that were weak. It is important for employees to know what they are doing well, so that they can repeat that behaviour. Likewise, ignoring weaknesses may cause employees to ignore problems.

Appropriate to the experience level. Suggest improvements that are realistic for the employee's level of experience.

Manageable. Limit your criticism to several key points that the employee can absorb and use to improve his or her performance.

Understood. Ensure that the employee understands your criticism, even if he or she disagrees with it.

Focused on improvement. Tell employees exactly what they need to do to remedy any deficiencies.

Focused on behaviour. If you focus your comments on the individual, the employee will take it personally and will have a more difficult time accepting them. It is far better to comment on an employee's actions or performance characteristics.

Honest. It is critical to be honest and candid with employees. Glossing over problem areas does not help either you or the employee.

The Evaluation Meeting

Be candid

Performance reviews are very stressful. The following tips will help you ensure that your performance evaluation interviews proceed smoothly.

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- Use a location that is private and free from interruptions. Do not answer the telephone or meet with other people during the meeting. Demonstrate respect for the person.
- Tell the employee about the meeting well in advance, to enable him or her to be prepared.
- Be open to revising the performance evaluation criteria during your discussion, but only if there are valid reasons for doing so.
- Discuss with the employee all the factors you used to evaluate performance, rather than scrutinizing one or two in particular.
- Be patient and calm. Do not argue with the employee.
- Emphasize the positive aspects of the employee's performance, but do not be afraid to mention areas of weakness.
- Identify methods for improvement or for gaining additional skills.
- Focus on the future, not the past. Set performance goals for the next review period, with the employee's input.
- Establish objectives and timelines for meeting the agreed upon goals.
- Get feedback from the employee on his or her reaction to your evaluation. You may wish to allow the employee a day or two to absorb the information.
- Let the employee know that you are available to support his or her efforts towards improvement.
- At the end of the meeting, stress what the employee did well, and review the methods you have chosen to help improve or build upon their performance.

Help Employees Plan for Performance

Performance planning is similar to a corporate vision statement. It answers the question: "Where do we want to go from here?" It involves examining issues such as improvement targets, training needs and career goals.

Keeping employees satisfied in their existing jobs can be a challenge so you must come up with a way of making it more meaningful. How to do so depends on the individual job, but it may include allowing the employee to work on a different project from time to time, or to work with new equipment or technology.

Help employees set appropriate performance goals

Goal setting is an important part of performance planning. Goals are important because they give employees something to work towards. They motivate them and provide encouragement and satisfaction.

The goals that you set with employees should come primarily from them. This gives them ownership over their goals and increases their commitment to them.

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Be careful how the goal is framed

Do not allow the employee to express the goal in vague terms. It must contain specific information about what the person wants to achieve. There must also be a way of measuring whether or not the person has reached that goal, where possible.

Make the goal something that the person can reasonably expect to be able to attain. It must also be something that is relevant to our organization. The goal should also be time dated and not too long-range. If it appears that a greater period is needed to meet the goal, it is better to set a series of sub-goals that the person can meet within a reasonable time span; otherwise, people lose sight of the goal and get discouraged.

Employees have a tendency to be overly ambitious in the number and scope of goals they set for themselves. To avoid this, limit the goals to the three to five most important ones.

Revisit goals on a regular basis. A quarterly review is generally sufficient. At that time, the employee should fill out a brief interim review that outlines his or her progress. This gives you an opportunity to provide any assistance that the person may require, or to realign the goal so that it may be met. For example, a crisis may have come up that has made it impossible for the person to meet the goal. Rather than waiting until the end of the evaluation period and forcing the employee to come to you with a missed goal, it is better to put a new time frame on the goal, or apply new resources to it, so that it doesn't simply fall by the wayside.

Reinforce excellence

Many people will tell you that the managers for whom they did their best work were the ones who provided them with praise and appreciation. The least successful leaders are those who believe that yelling at people and controlling their every action is an excellent management tool.

Management by fear is completely ineffective. It may work in the short term, but as a long-term reinforcer of employee behaviour it is extremely weak. When you emphasize the negative you end up with employees who spend most of their time standing around talking about how unhappy they are, rather than doing their job.

The single best reinforcement is not money, but acknowledgement of a job well done. You can achieve this type of reinforcement in many ways.

A critical kind of reinforcement is praise or a thank you for doing a good job. Even if someone knows they have done a good job, they still need to hear it.

One of the best compliments that a person can ever receive is a secondhand compliment, because it is inherently credible. If you hear something favourable about your employees, pass it along.

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You can acknowledge an employee who has done a good job by putting their name on a bulletin board, or into our newsletter, or by praising them at a staff meeting. This kind of public praise makes people feel very good about themselves and the job that they have done.

Assign top performers challenging work

Another thing you can do is to assign someone to a special project. Many people find it challenging and rewarding to work in new areas or on different projects.

Acknowledge that they have been doing a good job and that you believe they are capable of handling a new project.

Another approach is to have senior management, such as a department head, thank the employee personally. This lets the person know that their performance is widely recognized. Linked to that is allowing the employee to report the results of their work directly to senior management, rather than having you bring it forward.

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Above all, we're on your side. We work with you to prevent costly problems and when litigation is necessary, we act as strong advocates to protect your interests.

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About Lauren Bernardi

Lauren is a lawyer and human resource advisor with the Mississauga firm of Bernardi Human Resource Law. Lauren's advisory, training and educational services help managers direct their human resources in a strategically sound and legally appropriate manner. She is an accomplished and entertaining speaker on management and human resource issues.

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