

Managing Performance Appraisals

By Wolf Gugler

When it comes to performance appraisals, are you processing paper like a zombie, giving employees bare bones feedback, based on your subjective memory? James Pattison, one of Canada's most successful business entrepreneurs and philanthropists, used to subscribe to the theory of firing the lowest car sales person monthly from his automotive dealerships. Motivation was unspoken; sell-or-be-fired was fairly straightforward.

There's no stronger advocate of tough-mindedness in performance management than GE's outgoing CEO Jack Welch, who advocates demanding appraisals. He's known for his insistence that managers rank all of their employees according to their talent and potential—and then weed out accordingly; “Find the best and cull the rest.”

He's also been quoted as saying, “You have to go along with a can of fertilizer in one hand and water in the other and constantly throw both on the flowers. If they grow you have a beautiful garden. If they don't, you cut them out. That's what management is all about.”

Then, there's Dilbert[®], whose sarcastic feedback makes us laugh, but sometimes hits too close to home.

Throughout our evolution of management styles, we've come to the realization we must take the individual into consideration when gauging how well they are doing at work.

One of the most overlooked areas is the answer to the employee asking, “how am I doing?” Giving honest feedback can be one of the toughest jobs a Manager has to do.

Here are a few ideas on how to prepare and deliver the thoughtful reviews both employees and the company deserve, which should help to retain the producers and help eliminate marginal performers.

There are three stages to the process;

- develop performance goals which may include performance objectives, competency development goals, and action steps
- review, track and record the progress of each of the above
- evaluate performance against these goals and conduct in-depth competency assessments. Provide feedback on all of the above, including “upward feedback” from subordinates and team members

Here are the steps to take the strain out of providing meaningful feedback:

Do it in the right setting—all sessions should be conducted in closed-door offices with no interruptions. Privacy is the golden rule here. Ignoring this will break the manager-employee trust you work so hard to build with your team.

Use “self-feedback”—that is, hear them out regarding their own appraisal of their work. You'll find employees are tougher on themselves than others are, and they will work harder at resolving issues they identify in themselves. Offer them your perspective once they have shared theirs. Turn it into a dialogue, but not a debate.

Get tough—address performance problems directly. Issues left unresolved fester and turn into larger problems. Nip them in the bud. Deal with them the same day they occur, while fresh in everyone’s mind. Ensure that you have personally observed these situations and don’t rely on third party comments before taking action.

Clearly communicate expectations—they need to be delivered in a clear, concise and quantifiable manner. Numbers, dates and pre-written standards are helpful to ensure no misinterpretation occurs.

Communicate feedback frequently; try to also catch them in the act of doing something good. Praise is the best motivator of all. Ensure they are aware they can approach you at any time to ask, “how am I doing?” rather than just at year-end.

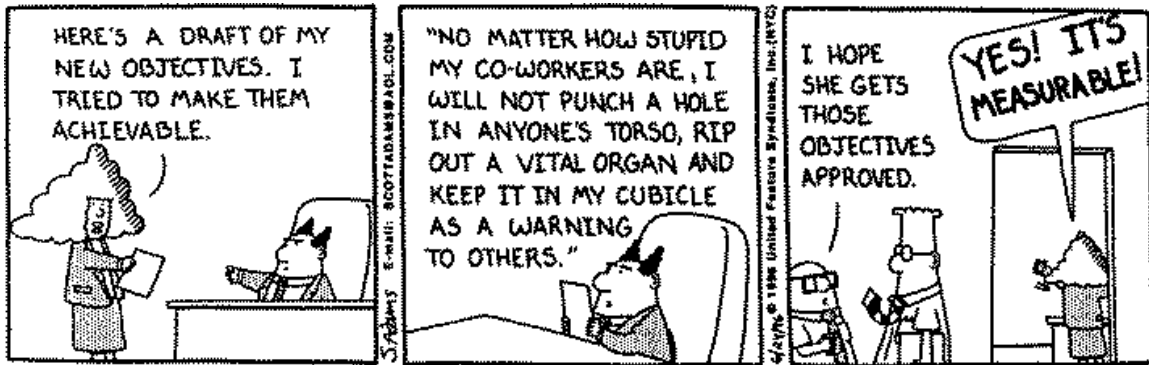
Keep documentation. Performance problems should most certainly be documented; otherwise, the company may be open to litigation if unsatisfactory performance leads to demotion or termination. Your human resources and legal teams will thank you, as well as indemnifying your company. Note dates, times and how the problems were communicated to the employee.

Note: this list could be listed in two three columns to save room:

Depending on the position, areas to be covered include:

- Appearance, deportment
- Communication skills
- Competency
- Computer skills
- Cost management
- Creativity
- Decisiveness
- Delegation
- Dependability
- Stress management
- Development
- Goals and objectives
- Improvement
- Initiative
- Interpersonal skills
- Judgement
- Knowledge
- Leadership
- Management (people, projects)
- Organizing
- Motivation
- Performance
- Planning
- Potential

Problem solving
Quality
Responsibility
Stress management
Tact
Time management



Elena—not sure what the rules are re: reprints, but this Dilbert cartoon sure goes with the article!

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