Tips for Providing Feedback on Performance Weaknesses

Most managers experience some degree of anxiety when delivering feedback on performance weaknesses. While it can be a sensitive topic in informal sessions, poor performance can be more difficult to discuss during a formal performance review due to implications on compensation and record keeping.

While the tips below are good rules to follow regardless of the forum, they tend to take on more meaning during the formal review process.

Before the Review: Create a Platform for a Constructive Discussion

1) Work on Your Employee Relationships — Employees will not receive constructive criticism well if they feel the foundation of your evaluation is rooted in personality differences. While you do not need to be your employee’s “friend,” you should work to create the perception that you are fair and reasonable. The healthier the relationship, the easier it is to deliver this type of feedback.

2) Clearly Explain Performance Expectations — There is nothing more frustrating for an employee than to spend an entire review cycle working towards goals that turn out not to matter. Make sure you and your employee are on the same page as to the type of behaviors, activities, or skills that demonstrate expected performance.

3) Provide Informal Feedback between Reviews — It is important to try to address undesirable behavior or performance problems as they arise. This increases the chances that you can improve performance sooner. It also ensures that your employee does not hear about a development area for the first time in the review, which can be months after the problem first arose.

4) Collect Concrete Examples — It will be easier to provide this type of feedback if you can cite specific examples where the behavior or lack of skill had a negative impact on a task, project, or assignment. Additionally, you can use these examples to point to any improvements you witnessed across the review cycle, allowing you to cast the development area in a more positive light.

During the Review: Ensure Messages Are Received

5) Start with and Focus on the Good News — Everyone likes to be told they’re doing well. Providing examples of how performance helped the business is critical as it sets the stage for using examples when you discuss performance problems or development areas later. Additionally, you’re letting your employees know that you value the contributions they make to the business and mitigating against any feelings of “my boss is out to get me” when the discussion moves to development areas.

6) Avoid Making Judgments — Avoid words like “poor performance” or “weakness”; instead, present these issues in the context of developmental opportunities. Indeed, by tying this feedback to the impact performance has on specific business objectives, you increase the chances your review will be perceived as fair.

7) Don’t Just Talk, Listen — It’s not unnatural for people to be defensive or feel the need to make excuses for their poor performance. You can help prevent these instances from becoming confrontational by listening to their counterpoints. Sometimes the excuses are valid, others not. In either case, you can use this part of the discussion as the groundwork for building a plan together for closing this performance gap.
8) **Prepare for Negative Reactions** — Regardless of your planning and preparation, there is always a chance your employee will react negatively. In those situations, it is critical to listen to their points, appear calm, and to make sure you present an unbiased view of the development area. Once your point has been made, you can attempt to develop a plan for addressing the performance problem then, or you can wait until the employee appears more receptive to your perspective.

9) **Summarize the Conversation and Provide Next Steps** — Begin to develop a plan for addressing the performance weaknesses and provide an overview of how you plan to support your employee through this process. You may also take this opportunity to discuss your expectations for the next review cycle. Even if the conversation has been tense, make sure you provide a summary that includes performance strengths.

**After the Review: Follow Through on Your Commitments**

**Lay the Groundwork for the Next Review**—By following through on your commitments, you not only guarantee that you provide informal feedback across the review cycle, but you also build trust with your employee, which helps ensure the next review you deliver will be successful.