

The Problem with Your Performance Review Feedback

by Charles S. Jacobs

Next to perhaps a layoff, a performance review is probably the least eagerly anticipated event in the office, both for the manager and the employee. No one enjoys giving difficult feedback or receiving it. Worse yet, studies have shown that reviews rarely result in improved performance.

While positive feedback is enjoyable, it doesn't improve performance because we're internally driven to do the best we can. Negative feedback either has no effect or makes performance worse.

According to brain science, the reason is that rather than record our experience of the world, our minds create it. Each of us has our own unique version of events. Managers tend to see things one way and employees another, particularly when it comes to shortfalls in performance and the feedback we use to address it.

Here's how it works. Over our lifetimes, each of us builds up a self-image, and a positive one is critical to our well-being. Feedback in conflict with it creates an uncomfortable situation psychologists call cognitive dissonance. We are then motivated to do everything we can to reduce the dissonance, and we take the path of least resistance.

While we could admit we're just not as good as we thought we were, it's much easier to rationalize or discount the feedback instead. So we either blame the shortfall in performance on factors beyond our control, like defective customers, or we discount the source of the feedback. We are not the problem, we reason, but our bosses.

So the effect of the manager's feedback is not at all what is intended. For example:

You say: "This review is an opportunity to offer you a little feedback to help you improve."

Your employee thinks: "This review is an opportunity to blame your failings as a manager on me."

You say: "Your performance is not meeting expectations in this area."

Your employee thinks: "God couldn't meet your ridiculous expectations."

Even just a seemingly objective observation doesn't produce what's expected.

You say: "You didn't meet your sales goals for the year."

Your employee thinks: "How could anyone sell such lousy products?"

Nor does the discussion of the objectives for the following year work any better.

You say: "Here are your goals for next year."

Your employee thinks: "Once again, I'm being set up to fail."

When salary is discussed in the same meeting as performance, the employee hears even less of what's being said. They're focused on what's important to them, and that's their salaries.

The only solution is to turn management on its head. Overcome the perceptual conflicts by reversing the roles. Let the employee drive the discussion by asking, rather than telling, when it comes to both performance feedback and goal setting.

Have the employees do their own appraisal prior to the review. Then start the discussion not with your evaluation of their performance, but with the question, "How did you do last year?" Questions force people to come to terms with what is being said, so they avoid the problem of misinterpretation.

Where there are shortfalls, ask the employees to come up with ways to address them. Not only will they have some interesting ideas, they will be far more willing to own them and take responsibility for their success. The same psychological dynamic holds when employees generate their own objectives.

This isn't turning the asylum over to the inmates. Whether it's performance evaluation, development plans, or objectives, it's still your prerogative to decide if they are adequate. When you make your decision, however, it only makes sense to incorporate the employee's view.

Not only does this leverage the way the mind works, it's a much easier and less stressful way to manage. The responsibility for managing performance is placed where it belongs — on the employee. The manager is no longer the driver, but the coach.

But you can't ask questions the way a prosecutor cross-examines a hostile witness. The employee will become even more defensive. Since the tone of voice and body language must be in sync with the words, you must really believe your role is to coach your people to success. There's no way to fake it.

While this approach will work with the overwhelming majority of people, there are some that just won't own up to their responsibilities. Should you encounter one, you then need to deliver a straight message, but only as a last resort.

This doesn't mean that you don't hold people rigorously accountable for results. In fact, it's much easier when they're the ones setting the objectives and evaluating performance. But sometimes as managers, the best we can do for people is to give them the opportunity to pursue career options elsewhere.

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