Solutions

Performance Strategies for Managers and Supervisors from the Division of Personnel

Winter 2009

SPECIAL EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION ISSUE

CONTENTS

Quick Tip:

From the editors of *Solutions*

Create a team of problem solvers by asking employees to bring three possible solutions that could improve team functions to every staff meeting. As team members consistently improve functions, they place their personal stamp on the end product or service, thereby creating a sense of ownership. This will help team members take pride in their work and teach them to automatically look for solutions when challenges arise.

"Together we are always able to accomplish what none of us could achieve alone." -Dan Zandra

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Holding Difficult Conversations:

Discussing Performance Appraisals and Performance Improvement

By Dick Grote

Two of the most common areas in which the need for a difficult conversation arises are performance appraisal and performance improvement. Many supervisors would rather endure a colonoscopy than deliver a less-than-stellar performance review. And if an employee's performance isn't up to par, some supervisors quake in their boots at the thought of having to tell the employee directly that his or her performance or behavior isn't acceptable.

What is a Performance Appraisal?

The reason that so many supervisors have difficulty holding performance appraisal discussions is that they simply don't understand what a performance appraisal is. Let's be clear about this fundamental issue: *A performance appraisal is a formal record of a supervisor's opinion of the quality of an employee's work.* That's right: the performance appraisal documents the supervisor's opinion about just how good a job Sally or Sam has done over the past 12 months.

Will the employee agree with that opinion? Maybe not, particularly if the supervisor has set the performance bar high and maintains tough and demanding standards. And that's okay. The purpose of the performance appraisal discussion is not to gain the employee's agreement with what the supervisor has written. It is to gain the employee's understanding of exactly how his or her supervisor has evaluated his contribution to the organization over the past year.

Now if that supervisor's opinion is based on some bias or prejudice, obviously that won't fly. That's why the supervisor's opinion must be based on observations of the individual's work performance. As long as supervisors can point to examples that support their judgments, they're doing what the organization expects them to do.

Is a Middle Rating "Mediocre"?

Another area where supervisors may need help is explaining to an employee who's performed at a successful level all year long that his performance appraisal rating is just that – successful on the rating scale.

Too often people believe that a middle rating in an organization's rating system is the same as getting a C in school. Since the only metaphor they have for what the middle rating represents is what they learned in school, they believe that being rated with the middle rating means that the organization feels their performance is mediocre, second-rate, or run-of-the-mill.

Of course, that's not true because a grade of C in a school has no relationship to a middle rating in an organization's appraisal system, particularly when the organization holds people to high expectations.

A school district has to accept every student who lives in that district—it can't exercise any selectivity. The school can't decide to only accept the top athletes, or only those who are smart enough to get into Ivy League colleges. If you live in that school district, the school has to let you in.

But that's not true in organizations. State agencies don't hire just anyone who applies; they hire on merit and search for the best person they can find. So there's no valid comparison between getting a middle rating in a highly selective organization and being graded as a C student in a school that has to accept everybody.

Continued on the next page.

Discussing Performance Appraisals and Performance Improvement

Continued from page 1

Here's a much better and more valid analogy to help supervisors explain to their people what the middle rating really represents. It's par in golf.

Ask any golfer if he considers shooting par to be the same as being a C student in school. He'll laugh at you. Par is something to strive for; something to be proud of. Par represents the level of play that's expected of an expert on a course or on a particular hole. And that's what the middle rating in a performance appraisal system represents.

Yes, there are people who can shoot better than par, and there are people who can consistently perform at a superior level. But in both cases, they're the exceptions. When supervisors understand that awarding someone a middle rating in the agency's performance appraisal system is the same as saying, "You're shooting par," they are more likely to render more accurate performance appraisals and make their lives easier in explaining what the rating really means.

Dealing with Performance Problems: Identifying the Issue

Everybody gets a performance appraisal. Only a few ever get involved in conversations dealing with the need for immediate performance improvement. Consequently, before a supervisor confronts "Jane" with the fact that she's not meeting his expectations, the supervisor must make sure he's got a solid fix on the nature of the problem before talking to Jane.

First, there are only three kinds of people problems—*attendance* (coming or not coming to work on time every day), *performance* (quality and quantity of work), and *conduct* (following the rules and acting appropriately).

The supervisor needs to determine which one of these three areas is the primary concern? Getting a clear fix on the issue will help keep the meeting on track if things start to go astray.

Any time a supervisor has a concern with one of his people, what he's essentially saying is that there's a gap between what he wants the employee to do and what the employee is actually doing. Before the supervisor can ask the employee to close the gap, the supervisor has to be able to specify exactly what the gap is.

For example:

Desired performance: Be at your workstation every morning, prepared and ready to begin work at 8:00 a.m.

Actual performance: In the last three weeks there were four occasions when Denise was more than 10 minutes late to work. (NOT: "She's always late!")

Desired performance: Work only on assigned duties while at work. If I am unavailable, provide assistance to coworkers on any of their projects.

Actual performance: This morning Margie was in the lunchroom when she should have been working. On two occasions last week she had been doing personal business and was late back from lunch. On 10/16 she was doing her income tax and earlier had been writing letters and making personal phone calls. (NOT: "She spends too much time on personal business.")

Why is getting the employee to agree to change so important?

Two reasons: First, the employee who agrees to change (as opposed to being told to do or else!) is more likely to change. More importantly, the supervisor never knows at the time of the meeting what will happen once it's over.

If the supervisor handles the discussion professionally, the odds are good that the employee will change and get back to doing the job as she should.

But if the problem continues, and the need for another conversation arises, the supervisor will have a separate issue to discuss—the employee's failure to live up to the agreement that was made in the original meeting. That's why gaining agreement is so important.

"Okay," a supervisor asks, "but how do I go about getting him to agree to change?" The answer is simple. You gain someone's agreement just by asking for it: "Denise, I need you to agree that you'll be at your workstation at 8 a.m." Remind the employee that all you're asking her to do is to agree to do what she's getting paid to do—to perform properly and follow the agency's rules. That's not too high of an expectation.

But what if the matter isn't as clear-cut as breaking a rule or not being on time – *what if it's an attitude problem?*

If the supervisor presents the situation as an "attitude problem," she'll probably have little difficulty presenting a long list of examples, each one of which will be a specific behavior—sometimes overt, sometimes nonverbal ("He rolls his eyes every time I ask him the status of the Tompkins project").

In this case, the best advice for the supervisor is to keep track of all the specific physical, verbal, and nonverbal behaviors that are inappropriate and write down the time of each and how often they occur. This will prevent the employee from later denying what happened. Then identify the impact of this inappropriate behavior.

In other words, answer the "so what?" questions:

- □ *What difference does it make?*
- □ *How does this behavior affect other people's ability to get their work done?*
- □ *What's the effect on citizens?*
- □ *On your agency?*
- □ *On you?*

Armed with this list, the supervisor is ready to talk with the employee.

Read a sample script and the conclusion of this article on page 3.

Holding Difficult Conversations:
Discussing Performance Appraisals and Performance Improvement

Here's a good opening script that gets right to the point:

"George, I have a problem." (Saying "I" and not "you" reduces defensiveness.")

Calmly and factually describe the specific inappropriate behaviors you've observed.

Say, "Help me understand why this is happening…" Then - shut up and listen.

What you're listening for are reasons, not excuses. Determine whether the individual has a logical reason for the apparent inappropriate behavior. Then ask the powerful question,

"What are your objectives in doing this?"

Asking someone what their objectives are is usually enough to convince the individual that the jig is up and it's time to stop.

And "Stop!" is what the manager needs to say. Too often managers don't take the necessary step of saying directly to the employee, "What you are doing is inappropriate. You must stop doing this."

Along with telling the individual to stop engaging in the problem behavior, the manager also needs to tell the person what she needs to start doing: Being courteous, cooperative and helpful. This helpful behavior is a condition of employment for everyone whose job involves public service, and the manager needs to take the initiative in reminding people of that.

Dick Grote is president of Grote Consulting Corporation in Dallas. Texas. He is the author of many books, including the management classic, *Discipline Without Punishment*, (now translated into more than a dozen languages) and the highly-popular *The Performance Appraisal Question and Answer Book*. He specializes in helping public sector organizations create effective performance management systems.

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Workforce Management
Managers' top 7 documentation mistakes

What's HR's strongest weapon in the fight against lawsuits? That's right, documentation. But too often, documentation is weakened when managers make some common mistakes.

The biggest documentation blunder, of course, is not having any. But there are plenty of other little things managers do that can get their organization in trouble.

Here are some common mistakes many managers make, according to attorney Allison West, who spoke at this year's Society for Human Resources Management conference:

Using general buzz words

Statements like "The employee has a bad attitude" or "He's not a team player" are worthless on their own — and are often red flags for discrimination suits. They make it look like the organization's fishing for reasons to fire or discipline an employee. The documentation needs to include the specific actions and behaviors that led to those descriptions.

Coming to legal conclusions

Managers must be sure not to accuse anyone of breaking the law. For example, documentation should never say an employee "sexually harassed" someone. Instead, the manager just needs to describe what the employee did or was accused of doing.

Not giving the employee a chance to weigh in

Employees should be able to make written statements about parts of the documentation they disagree with. It lets the employee know you're being fair and can go a long way toward alleviating frustration. The supervisor may even learn something about how to manage the employee.

Using absolute language

Statements like "The employee never met deadlines" and "The employee was always late" are rarely true. Employees will always be able to point to times when they made deadlines, or came in on time. And when documentation contains *any* statements that aren't true, employees — and their attorneys — can use that to their advantage.

Giving timelines without following them

If a manager disciplines an employee and writes that she has 90 days to improve her performance, then he'd better give her 90 days to improve her performance. Supervisors must be absolutely sure the timeframe is appropriate before sealing the deal in writing.

Writing verbal hiccups

Meaningless phrases like "it appears" or "it seems like" often innocently appear in managers' writing. But to an outside reader, they imply the manager isn't sure what he or she is saying is true.

Including things the employee wasn't directly told

Writing down critiques of an employee's performance won't do any good if you can't prove the employee was told what was wrong and given a chance to improve. Where appropriate, have the employee sign off on the documentation.

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Perceptiveness

Diagnose and cure what's ailing teams

You can't afford to ignore problems in a dysfunctional work team. Start working toward a solution by performing an accurate diagnosis:

Identify the team's members. "Who's on the team" can be confusing, especially in a cross-departmental group or an environment of constant change. Draw up a list that clearly distinguishes core team members from other employees who are only peripherally involved.

Is it really a team? The word "team" is commonly misused. A department isn't necessarily a team, for instance. A true work team has 10-12 members at the most, all working toward a common, very specific goal.

Collect data. Hold a series of one-on-one interviews with each team member to explore problems and concerns. Ask for concrete examples that you can verify independently. Another option: Develop a survey for members to fill out. A structured approach like this can make everyone feel more comfortable sharing information.

Provide feedback. Discus how you'll share your findings with the team upfront to avoid surprises. You may want to meet individually if you have specific performance issues to discuss, or get together as a group to clarify team dynamics (or both).

Be prepared for problems. You may have to confront team members' egos, or organizational obstacles like lack of resources. Don't try to "protect" your team—they need and deserve the truth if they want to achieve their goals.

Stay out of the way. It's not your job to solve all the team's problems. Once you've identified issues to resolve, you can work with the team on strategies for improvement (maybe by asking team members to agree on specific actions) — but , don't take over unless they grow hopelessly deadlocked. Follow up as necessary, but keep responsibility for resolution where it belongs—with the team.

Integrity

PERforM annual rating period information

We are once again preparing for another annual rating period using PERforM. The information below provides answers to some of the issues you may encounter.

Did you know that an appraisal's header information, number of components, and "chain of review" (rater and reviewer) is based upon the employee and position records that are effective in the SAM II-HR system on the day the annual appraisal is created?

Specifically, the employee's job title may appear incorrect in the appraisal header if a personnel action (promotion, etc.) was recently processed. This same scenario could affect the number of components that appear; however, a 2008 enhancement gives agency human resources offices some flexibility in altering the component number if necessary.

Also, it is not uncommon for employment changes to occur during the annual rating period. Consequently, the reviewer's name has been added to appraisal pages to more easily determine the "chain of review" (employee – rater – reviewer).

A question often asked by raters is, **"How do I exempt an employee from their annual appraisal rating?"** A new help link is available in PERforM that provides the processing steps. The short answer is that exemptions are done through the normal appraisal process.

The rater will create an annual appraisal for the employee in PERforM. However, instead of rating each component, the rater will provide an explanation for the exemption in the "Overall Comments" text box at the bottom of the appraisal. The "Exempt & Submit" button is then used to send the appraisal to the reviewer for approval.

Many raters also ask: **"When can performance plans for the new appraisal period be created?"**

The answer is that new performance plans can be developed any time after the appraisal for the previous appraisal period is created. This means, after the rater has started and saved the employee's annual appraisal for 2008 (and the appraisal is in any status except "New"), the rater can make revisions to the objectives as needed for the employee's 2009 (calendar) appraisal year and print out the new performance plan.

Regardless of whether or not the objectives from 2008 require changes for 2009, a new performance plan should be generated for the employee. In fact, after the annual appraisal to rate 2008 performance is created, the objectives "reviewed" button will change back to "No" which may be useful in reminding raters to print a new performance plan for employees.

When changes are required to any of the existing objectives, the rater will no longer receive the message *"This objective is associated with an existing appraisal and cannot be edited. To make revisions, create a new objective with your desired text and delete this obsolete objective."* Instead, the objective "Edit" link is functional and can be used by the rater to make necessary revisions.

While this article does not cover every question that users have, I hope it is beneficial. Much of this information and many other facts can be found in ***Frequently Asked Questions***, ***PERforM Guidelines***, and the user manual located on the PERforM portal page at **www.perform.mo.gov**.

By Marian Luebbert
Division of Personnel

Vision

Leadership style: Choose the right mix

Effective leadership is usually a mix of two distinct styles: **Directive** (one-way communication, where you tell the employee what to do) and **Supportive** (two-way communication, involving questions, listening, advice, and encouragement.). Choosing the best combination depends on the employees and the tasks. Here's what to consider:

Experience level. If workers don't have experience in the job you're assigning, you'll need to take a *Directive* approach upfront. Explain what to do and answer any questions employees may have. Let them know what to expect so they can minimize mistakes and unpleasant surprises.

Learning process. As employees gain knowledge and expertise, their enthusiasm and performance may fluctuate. The job may be more difficult than they expected, or less interesting. This calls for coaching: a combination of *Directive* and *Supportive* approaches. Tell workers what they need to learn and do in order to get better. Listen to their concerns so you can enhance their commitment to success.

Comfort level. At some point, employees need to feel they can succeed in the job on their own. A *Supportive* style will address their doubts about competence. Ask questions and listen without telling them what to do. Praise and encourage their success—and offer advice, not instructions, as long as they demonstrate that they know what to do.

Autonomy. Once employees feel comfortable and confident, back off and delegate the responsibility for doing the job with a minimal level of *Supportive* behavior. Remain available to answer questions and help with problems. If you've done your job right, they won't need much in the way of the *Directive* style until they're ready to move up to the next level.

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Ragan's Management Resources
111 E. Wacker Dr., Ste. 500
Chicago, IL 60601
312-960-4100

Self-Direction

Add conviction to your communication

Eliminate the following bad habits to communicate with strength and clarity:

Uncertainty

Phrases such as *"kind of"* and *"sort of"* communicate uncertainty and the inability to form clear thoughts.

Power play: Replace "I *kind of* have a problem with your idea" with a clear, strong and accurate message. Say: "I have concerns about your suggestion. Can you tell me more about…"

Wishy-washiness

When you say the words *"I will try to…"* you are less often describing a commitment you are willing to make than expressing your doubts or unwillingness to see an action or plan through.

Power play: Use a more active voice to convey your plans. Say "*I will* call you by Wednesday, and we can discuss the situation more at that time."

Powerlessness

Saying *"I have to…"* implies that you have no control over your actions and choices—giving you an excuse if things don't turn out well.

Power play: Speak firmly, saying *"I will," "I need to…"* or *I am"* to communicate your plans and intentions.

Leadership Strategies
1101 King Street, Suite 110
Alexandria, VA. 22314
Telephone: 800-722-9221

Mentoring

7 steps for reacting to criticism

Receiving negative feedback is never easy. Take these steps to ease the pressure so that you can respond in a way that creates a lasting positive impression:

Breathe. Before you flinch, respond, defend yourself or roll your eyes, take a deep breath. Use that brief interlude to prepare yourself to listen without judging.

Detach. Mentally separate yourself from the criticism by telling yourself that the feedback is not about you personally.

Listen. Tune in to what the other person is saying instead of formulating your rebuttal.

Respond. Reassure the speaker that you are hearing the feedback by saying: *"It sounds like you needed…"* or *"I see what you mean."*

Accept. Take full responsibility for your actions without shifting blame or making excuses. Offer a diplomatic apology: *"I am sorry my actions had that effect. It certainly was not my intention."*

Map the future. State your intentions for better meeting the person's needs in the future. *"I will definitely focus on that next time,"* or *"I will make certain that does not happen again."*

Thank the other person. Remember that the feedback was not intended as a personal attack but as a way to improve a working relationship. *"Thank you for bringing that to my attention. I appreciate the feedback. Please let me know if you notice something like that again."*

Communication Briefings
1101 King Street, Suite 110, Alexandria, VA. 22314
Telephone: 800-722-9221

Crucial Conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high

By Joseph Grenny, cofounder VitalSmarts, coauthor *Crucial Conversations*

Most employees feel frustrated, concerned, upset, or discouraged at some point during their work day. Why? Because they disagree with the boss, don’t support a suggestion a colleague just proposed, or otherwise possess different views from the vocal majority. And yet almost none of these employees share their opinions in a way that gets results. They either clam up because they figure it’s politically unwise to disagree with either the majority or the authority, or they hold their differing opinions inside until they eventually blow a gasket. That is, they toggle from silence to violence. Neither method gets an idea out into the open where it can be made part of the collective view. Neither method helps improve working conditions or relationships.

Why do we routinely toggle from silence to violence? We go to silence because we *dread* crucial conversations. These are interactions where stakes are high, opinions differ, and emotions run strong. We fear them because our past experience has taught us that if we’re both emotional and honest, bad things are likely to happen. So we go to silence. Better to let someone else speak his or her mind and suffer the slings and arrows of emotion-fed candor.

We go to violence because we’re so *unskilled* at holding crucial conversations. While research shows that the ability to hold crucial conversations is the key to influence, job effectiveness, and even marital success, most of us have little or no formal training on the topic. Not so much as ten minutes. We’ve developed our existing style by watching our parents, friends, and former bosses. There’s a scary thought. Picking up on the not-so-great skills of our extant role models, when we do decide to speak up, we typically employ sarcasm, caustic humor, guilt trips, debate tactics, and other forms of verbal violence. Eventually we note that we’re in trouble for having said something and we pull back into silence. We toggle from silence to violence and back again, and it’s not a pretty picture.

Here are some helpful tips for speaking your mind in a way that gets heard.

Reverse your thinking. Most of us decide whether or not to speak up by considering the risks of doing so. Those who are best at crucial conversations don’t think first about the risks of speaking up. They think first about the risks of *not* speaking up. They realize if they don’t share their unique views, they will have to live with the poor decisions that will be made as a result of holding back their informed opinions.

Change your emotions. The primary reason we do badly in crucial conversations is that by the time we open our mouths we’re irritated, angry, or disgusted with the other person’s views and opinions. Then, no matter how much we try to fake it, our negative judgments creep into the conversation. So, before opening your mouth, open your mind. Try to separate people from the problem. Try to see others as reasonable, rational, and decent human beings—even if they hold a view that you strongly oppose. Hold a good thought and you will come across much better. Remember—if you hold court in your head, the verdict will show on your face.

Help others feel safe. Unskilled people believe that certain topics are destined to make other people defensive. Skilled folks realize people don’t become defensive until they feel unsafe. Try starting your next high-stakes conversation by assuring the other person of your positive intentions and your respect for them. When others feel respected and trust your motives, they let their guard down and begin to listen—even if the topic is unpleasant.

Invite dialogue. After you create a safe environment, confidently share your views. Once you’ve done so, invite differing opinions. This means you actually *encourage* the other person to disagree with you. Those who are best at crucial conversations aren’t just out to make their point; they want to learn. If your goal is just to dump on others, they’ll resist you. If you are open to hearing others’ points of view, they’ll be more open to yours. And finally, if you can’t remember anything else in the heat of the moment, ask yourself: “Are we in silence or violence?” If so, do your best to return to healthy dialogue.

Joseph Grenny is the coauthor of the New York Times bestsellers, *Crucial Conversations, Crucial Confrontations,* and *Influencer*. He is also a sought-after speaker, consultant and cofounder of *VitalSmarts,* an innovator in corporate training and organizational performance. **www.influencerbook.com**
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Inspirational managers take every opportunity to help people learn – that’s why they are so exciting to work with and why talented people have a homing device locked on to them.
-Judith Leary-Joyce,
CEO of Great Companies Consulting