



SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES FOR PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

As a leader, there are many individuals in your environment for whom you are responsible and for whom you may provide direct and indirect supervision. This includes faculty members, technicians, support and administrative staff. This responsibility often induces stress because few leaders know how to do so effectively, having had neither training for this responsibility nor positive examples in their own experience. In turn, your own discomfort can make the process more difficult for those being evaluated.

Here are some basic tips and hints for conducting evaluations and providing feedback that will be honest, constructive, and most likely to be heard by those within your scope of responsibility.

Approaches and Tips

Leaders can adopt some practices to manage the process better both for themselves and for those to whom they must give feedback, even when that feedback is negative.

The key to making the process more constructive and less stressful is to conceptualize the review process as part of a larger performance management approach that includes goal-setting, feedback and coaching. In this approach, you work to build a habit of frequent assessment of performance aimed at giving feedback as close to specific events as possible, with guidance provided to employees on how to succeed and improve, and a “no surprises” mindset.

In organizations that seek to build and maintain a culture of success, and that hire carefully, adopting a coaching mindset will help support high achievement.

“Leaders often find it difficult to report that an employee needs to improve. For example, the United States Government Accountability Office recently found that leaders report 99% of all federal employees to be above average.”

Using this mindset, a leader provides regular feedback and assistance, directly related to specific behaviors, tasks or goals. This approach recognizes achievement, while keeping expectations and aspirations high.

Goal Setting

Evidence suggests that one of the most effective ways to improve individual performance is through setting goals.

Goals linked to an individual’s aspirations and the institution’s mission are most likely to lead to high achievement and congruence with your expectations for individuals in your unit.

Stress-Reducing Practices

- *Set practical goals*
- *Frequent performance assessments*
- *Coach*
- *Give feedback as close to specific events as possible*
- *Provide guidance to employees on how to succeed and improve*
- *Adopt a “no surprises” mindset*

Engage in an interactive goal setting process with each individual.

To get started, invite the person to generate a draft of his/her performance goals, and schedule a goal-setting meeting. This meeting should be a forum for the individual to discuss those goals, as well as an opportunity for you to explain your expectations and how he or she fits into the larger picture of your unit and institution. While the goal-setting process is a collaborative endeavor, you have an obligation as a leader to





assure that the chosen goals are achievable and aligned with the institution's policies and mission.

Help set goals that are specific and difficult.

Goal setting should develop and expand an individual's experience, persistence, and professional strategies. It should not be a to-do list or a vague admonition to "do your best." Experts recommend that goals focus on specific and measurable objectives — rather than a list of tasks or activities — that require high levels of effort. For example, a meaningful goal could be "Over the next semester, I will work collaboratively with three colleagues in our department to present curriculum updates for our entry-level research methods course."

"The key difference between an effective and ineffective periodic performance review is whether the review summarizes what is already known. Review ratings should be based on conduct seen regularly and that have already been discussed with the individual."

Take time to document the goals.

You and the person should each have easy access to a copy of these goals. Documented goals provide a foundation to monitor progress and to provide meaningful feedback regularly. The goals can be revisited mid-way through the performance cycle. Those that are no longer consistent, relevant, or even "doable" within current conditions and restraints should be revised and updated.

"If a goal is long-term or difficult, breaking the goal into small, manageable tasks that increase in difficulty increases likelihood of achievement."

Feedback and Coaching

Once you have set and documented goals with an individual, it is important to provide feedback and coaching during frequent, scheduled check-in meetings.

Feedback and coaching increase confidence, and provide a means of assistance if current strategies and behaviors are not effective. For different categories of staff within your unit, the frequency of check-in meetings might vary: how often you meet to provide feedback to brand new assistant professors should differ from how often you check in with more senior, tenured, settled faculty.

Both of those cycles may differ from staff who report directly to you in managing your unit. Whatever cycle an individual is on, bear the following in mind.

Focus comments on specific tasks and observable behaviors.

For example, commenting "I have seen many times that you have turned down opportunities to collaborate with other members of our department. Collaborating and sharing insights is highly valued here and will benefit you as well as enhance our ability to excel as a department" is a more productive and respectful way to conduct a feedback discussion than by accusing, "What's wrong with you? Why are you so uncooperative?"

Evidence shows that people want feedback on their work. Feedback based on specific tasks and observable behavior minimizes the influence of emotion and directs the conversation towards issues related to position-relevant skills and goals.

Invite discussion.

An immediate way to minimize confrontation and anxiety during a feedback meeting is to invite the individual to contribute his/her understanding of a situation. For example, begin by asking: "I'd like to understand your perspective and hear your thoughts. How did you feel this project went?" People are more likely to speak candidly if they believe that they will be listened to and respected.

Consider providing as many as possible with a coach or mentor.

Coaches or mentors who are not formally involved in the evaluation of a person's performance can help increase job satisfaction — and even job performance — by helping the individual think through issues, providing resources, and delivering performance feedback in a low-pressure environment. When identifying potential mentors, seek out those who are capable of building a supportive relationship





with the person, who understand the institution and the professional discipline if appropriate, and who can clearly communicate expectations and feedback.

Assessing Performance

The goal-setting and coaching cycle is not complete without a formal performance assessment process. When paired with goal-setting, feedback, and coaching, individuals should not be surprised by the results of their formal performance assessment, as the ratings or scores will be based on behaviors that have already been discussed with the person.

Formal feedback on performance should occur at least annually, and ideally every six months.

Depending on the nature of the position held, more frequent reviews may be necessary for newer employees and for those who have been underperforming.

Compare the person's performance to established behavioral standards.

In a constructive system that is aligned with organizational goals, performance assessments represent an individual's performance compared to a set of position-relevant behavioral standards that are well-known to both incumbents in positions and to their leaders. Basing a performance review on an established set of behavioral standards assures that you can accurately assess and monitor a person's trajectory over time. Couple your feedback on observed behavior with measurable productivity over the review period.

Pair regular, early performance reviews with goal-setting meetings, not pay or promotion decisions.

Imagine you are reviewing your performance scores with the next person in the line above you. Immediately after showing you the rating, you are told you will not receive a raise for the year because you underperformed in a few areas. The two of you engage in a discussion of what you need to do to improve, and the whole while, your mind keeps wandering back to the money.

Feedback Ten Best Practices

1. **Ongoing:** Giving feedback is a system, not a one-time event.
2. **SMART:** Help those you supervise and for whom you are responsible to set goals that are SMART (specific, measurable, appropriate, realistic and timely).
3. **Aligned:** Work to align individual goals with the bigger picture of your unit, your college, and your university.
4. **Agreed-upon:** Agree upon individual and team goals at the beginning of the annual review cycle, and keep these goals in mind throughout the year.
5. **Flexible:** As priorities change during the course of the year, be willing to modify those goals in ways that help individuals, your unit or team, and you to succeed.
6. **Developmental:** Great performers are encouraged through feedback and informal coaching.
7. **Growth-Oriented:** Treat the feedback system as a chance to learn about yourself, and how you lead and manage.
8. **Seeking Success:** Regular meaningful feedback providing opportunities to improve, correct problems, and perform at expected levels.
9. **Transparent:** By the time the end of the cycle arrives and you must provide a final rating or assessment, neither you nor any individual you supervise should be surprised by the outcome.
10. **Discussed:** Give each person for whom you are responsible the chance to talk about what he/she accomplished during the course of the year. Praise where praise is well deserved; offer suggestions—not personal criticism—where change is necessary.





Feedback on performance should be a relatively unemotional experience that is focused on the specific behaviors or actions a person can take to improve.

Ideally, the individual leaves a review meeting with a renewed sense of what needs to be done to meet or exceed your institution’s goals, and an understanding of how you will be helping him/her to do so. Therefore, discussing money—which can be a difficult, distracting, and emotional experience—should be scheduled separately from performance review discussions.

Finally, remember the “no surprises rule.”

An annual review is not the appropriate time for you to introduce new feedback about an employee’s performance. Even if you observe an employee engaging in undesirable behavior in the days and weeks leading up to the annual review, address those issues in a separate meeting. If you do goal setting and regular feedback on performance well, when it comes time for the final evaluation, there should be no surprises for anyone in the room.

| Demonstrates Effective Communication | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| <i>Expresses ideas and information verbally and in writing in a manner that is effective for the audience and the situation; communication contains sufficient and not excessive detail.</i> | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Unsatisfactory | Needs Improvement | Satisfactory | Very Good | Role-Model |
| Struggles to convey even the most basic information in an understandable manner; communication is unclear or incomplete | Conveys some information in a manner that is appropriate for the audience; communication is sometimes unclear or lacks sufficient detail | Sometimes conveys information that is appropriate for the audience and situation. Information is generally clear, although it lacks important details and/or contains excessive detail | Communication is appropriate for the audience and situation. Information is generally very clear; critical details are sometimes missing, and/or details are unnecessary for the task at hand | Communication is appropriate for the audience and situation, and is exceptionally clear with the appropriate amount of detail |

*Example of a behavioral rating scale for the competency of “effective communication.”
The rating should be supported by specific examples that can be discussed with the*

