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Employee Performance Reviews — Dealing With Disagreements

By Dick Grote

What do you do when an employee disagrees with something you've written on their performance review? How can you prepare for this and deal with it effectively?

Start by listening to figure out the source of the disagreement. Is it an issue of fact (you wrote that the employee received a customer satisfaction score of 79 but the employee says that his score was actually 83), or is a matter of judgment (you wrote that the employee's customer service skills were unsatisfactory; she feels that her skills are terrific)? If the disagreement involves an issue of fact, get the facts and make any corrections necessary. If it's a matter of judgment, ask the employee for additional evidence. Then determine whether that evidence is weighty enough to cause you to change your mind, revise your judgment, and amend the rating that you assigned on the employee's performance review.

Most of the time, you have a reasonably good understanding of the areas where disagreements are likely to pop up in the course of the performance review discussion. Before beginning the discussion, re-read the review you wrote and try to spot the areas where you and the individual may not seem eye-to-eye. Then ask yourself, "What am I going to say when George disagrees with my assessment that his performance on the Thompson project just barely met expectations?" If you've taken to time to review the appraisal you've written for potential hot spots, and given some thought to how you'll respond, you're much less likely to be caught off guard.

During the employee performance review discussion, start with your higher ratings and move toward the lower ones. Be prepared to give additional examples besides the ones you've included on the formal written appraisal. Refer back to the informal conversations you have had with the individual over the course of the year.

Of course, if you haven't had on-going, informal performance review discussions with the individual over the course of the appraisal period, then it's much more likely that disagreements will surface during the review. That's one more reason for scheduling periodic, "How's it going?" discussions with each person on your team.

As soon as a disagreement pops up, switch into active listening mode. "Active listening" involves allowing the other person to clarify both the facts and feelings about an issue so there's nothing left under the surface. For example, using phrases as simple as, "Tell me more . . ." or, "What else can you share with me about that . . . ?" or, "Really . . . ?" can encourage people to talk more about their perceptions. Simply nodding without saying anything encourages people to expand on what they have said. It's not at all unlikely that the employee, allowed a sufficient chance to think aloud about what you have written, will end up saying, "Yeah, I guess I see what you mean."

In dealing effectively with employee performance review disagreements, remember what your objective in the discussion is — and what it isn't. Your objective in a performance review discussion is not to gain agreement. It is to gain understanding. If the employee agrees with you, that's great. But particularly if your appraisal is a tough-minded assessment of the fact the Charlie's contribution toward achieving your department's objectives was only mediocre, you'll probably never get him to agree. That's OK. What you want is for him to understand why you evaluated his performance the way you did, even if

his personal opinion is different.

Finally, if you have several employee performance reviews to deliver, don't start with the individual whose performance was the worst and where disagreements are the most likely to arise. Start with the easiest — your best performer — and move toward the more difficult. In this way, you'll build your skills and become more comfortable with the performance review process. Remember the advice that John Dillinger, the 1930's public-enemy #1, once provided: "Before you rob your first bank, knock off a couple of gas stations."

Dick Grote is one of America's most well-known speakers, authors, and consultants on employee performance reviews. He is the Chairman and CEO of Grote Consulting and the developer of the GroteApproach web-based performance review system - on the Web at

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Performance Reviews That Actually Improve Performance

By Jan B. King

Employee performance reviews are one of the most dreaded tasks by most managers. It is hard to win here - you can never say enough good things, and one word of criticism is generally the only thing they will remember.

Taking the easy way out and just documenting the positive will cause you a lot of trouble if you ever need to fire the employee.

The only way this ever gets better is with a lot of practice, and a pretty thick skin. Think about it this way: a bit of feedback that no one else has the guts to give a poor performer might turn around their whole career. Deliver the negative - you have to - but make sure the employee knows there are things

they can do about it. For more effective performance reviews, prepare at the time of hire by giving all employees copies of the review forms you use in their orientation packet. An employee who knows how she will be reviewed will direct his behavior accordingly from the beginning of his employment and will probably do all she can to be sure he has good reviews.

In fact, an employee should have copies of all survey and review material that he will encounter over the course of his employment. The perception is what you measure is what you care about. Give a description of how often you use each evaluation tool and how. This is particularly important if your company does 360 degree performance reviews. The purpose of reviews is not to trap employees, but to give them the tools to do their best for the company. Accordingly, your review forms should be created very carefully and should cover actions specific to his skills and responsibilities as well as his people skills with peers and subordinates.

I always do reviews in two parts. The first part is for the employee to fill out two weeks ahead of the actual review meeting. It asks questions like these: What could I do to make your work more productive? What equipment or training do you need to do your best work that you don't have? What could the company change (or add or delete) that would help you do your work better? What skills and abilities do you have that you think are underutilized? Any other comments or opinions you would like to express?

I have always found that getting an employee to express their feelings first, not only lets them know that you really are interested in their feedback, it also often results in their letting you know what they think their weaknesses are - meaning you don't have to be the first to bring these things up.

Most employees really want to do good work. And if you think an employee isn't really there to do good work, you shouldn't be reviewing them, you should be letting them go.

Jan B. King is the former President & CEO of Merritt Publishing, a top 50 woman-owned and run business in Los Angeles and the author of *Business Plans to Game Plans: A Practical System for Turning Strategies into Action* (John Wiley & Sons, 2004). She has helped hundreds of businesses with her book and her ebooks, *The Do-It-Yourself Business Plan Workbook*, and *The Do-It-Yourself Game Plan Workbook*. See

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