

Performing miracles

Turn dreaded reviews into employee-development tools

By Noa Glouberman

Do you hate performance reviews? You're not alone. Often perceived as labour-intensive and intimidating, they may not be giving you much value-added. Yet when executed properly, they can serve as powerful tools for employee development and can even help your company achieve more success.

"Rarely do I meet a new client that likes performance reviews," says Cori Maedel, chief executive officer of the Jouta Performance Group in Vancouver. "I hear people say, 'A company is better to have no performance program than the wrong one,' [but] I am 100 per cent in favour ... as long as they make sense."

The first step is to focus less on what is being done wrong and more on what is being done right. "There are all kinds of negative psychological effects around scoring people once a year on a scale of one to 10," Maedel says. "This seems totally disconnected with the real objective of a performance program, which is to develop your people."

"Annual performance reviews by themselves do not work," agrees Cissy Pau, principal consultant with Vancouver's Clear HR Consulting Inc. "Most employees want immediate feedback when they do something wrong and especially if they do something right."

An effective program includes more frequent reviews – quarterly, monthly or even weekly – even if they are informal. "Have a normal, relaxed conversation," Pau advises. "That way when you do go into serious negotiations over salary or position, it's not an anxiety-filled exercise. After all, it's supposed to be a performance discussion, not an investigation."

Although disclosing your observations about an employee's past performance in a clear and tactful manner is important, Pau warns that "looking forward is just as important as looking back." It's critical to use these meetings as opportunities to "set goals and targets for the upcoming month, quarter, year or whatever time period you need to consider."

Aligning individual goals with company-wide objectives can further motivate staff, driving personal performance and achievement by showing employees just how much their work matters to the overall success of the organization.

Says Pau, "Whatever your vision is – to double your revenue,

increase your customer base by 50 per cent or expand to a new city or region – the conversations that you have with your staff [members] about their performance should give you a chance to say, 'Hey, you're an important part of this process, this longer-term vision,' and 'Here is the role you can play to help us achieve these things and directly influence our success.'"

Create opportunities for professional development. "Both employee and employer should look at areas that might require a bit of improvement on the employee's part, such as additional sales training or improving [his or her] computer skills ... and how the company can help [the employee] achieve that."

Maedel agrees that "a performance program that works must be grounded in measurable objectives and [have] a developmental focus, whether that means developing an employee in a current role or for a future position."

To work, "the program must be aligned with the culture of your organization." It must employ "the same language your employees are speaking," from the terminology used for discussing performance down to the style and setting in which the dialogue takes place. Done right, reviews can "motivate employees and increase their productivity." Done wrong, they'll often have the opposite effect.

The tricky part, according to Sandra Reder, president and founder of Vancouver-based Vertical Bridge Corporate Consulting Inc., lies in the fact that when you have "multiple generations working together, each with different values, goals and communication styles ... there is no longer a one-size-fits-all type of performance review that meets everyone's needs."

Instead, today's employers must "recognize and understand the different communication styles as well as the needs and preferences of each generation," Reder says. "When it comes to



"It's supposed to be a performance discussion, not an investigation"

— Cissy Pau, principal consultant,
Clear HR Consulting

feedback, recognition and rewards, each generation has its differences."

Most baby boomers "don't need or want continuous feedback from their managers. They are clear on what their roles are within [their organizations], how they add value and what they need to do to fulfil the requirements of their position[s] ... Many are no longer looking at career development but [are] focused on career maintenance and retirement; they have the finish line in sight."

Members of Generations X and Y, on the other hand, "want immediate and constant feedback. If they are only going to work for a company for two years, they can't wait for a one-year review to find out how they are doing; they want an on-the-

spot performance review."

Reviews of younger workers, who are accustomed to real-time personal and professional interaction through computers and smartphones, may be more effective when leveraging the principles of social media and online collaboration.

"There are many web-based programs and interactive products on the market these days that harness the power of technology to deliver innovative performance-management systems to managers," says Reder.

She points specifically to a Toronto-based firm called Rypple that produces software with an interface that looks and functions much like that of Facebook, allowing managers to provide and request feedback (anonymously or not), monitor goals, "like"

certain tasks and even reward employees with virtual badges. This "modern, social software" leaves your team feeling "inspired and learning all the time," states a promotional video on the company's website.

While different generations may require varying approaches to performance management, Reder says it remains critical "to ensure the program is equitable to all employees and delivered consistently. If not, the program will offer no value to anyone." Yet if you are able to "figure out how to offer career development and performance management to employees in various demographics within your company, then you are going to have a beautiful program that meets everyone's needs." ■