Get the most from performance reviews

Go beyond once-a-year meetings with a policy of ongoing communication

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By Fiona Collie

The idea of sitting through performance reviews with team members may seem a daunting and stressful task for both of you. But taking advantage of an opportunity to communicate with your staff can be a real boost to office productivity and morale.

The meeting is a chance for employees to become more involved and voice opinions, while the firm is taking steps to maintain it's culture and business strategy, says Lynn Stoudt, a principal with Mercer LLC, a human resources consulting firm in Toronto.

The meetings don't have to be stressful to be constructive. These tips will show you how.

> Make sure the employee is prepared
To avoid awkward surprises during the meeting, make it clear to the team member what you want to discuss in advance.

"There must be preparation on both sides and clarity around how the meeting is going to play itself out," says Cissy Pau, principal consultant with Vancouver-based Clear HR Consulting Inc. Set the agenda and outline issues so there is no misunderstanding between you and the employee.

> Provide complete information
To make the review successful, you must express all information completely and clearly.

"When you give feedback — whether positive or negative — you must describe the behaviours you are referring to and give examples," Pau says. "Explain to the employee the consequences and impacts of their behaviour."

For example, if the issue is a lack of attention to detail, cite instances in which the employee made errors, such as in a report, and the consequences of those errors, which may have been other team members receiving incorrect information.

As you go through issues, make the team member a part of the conversation, Stoudt suggests. For example, ask the employee what they feel was their biggest achievement, as well as areas that need improvement.

> Keep the communication going
Performance review discussions don't have to be restricted to once-a-year- meetings. Pau suggests a policy of casual, ongoing communications between you and your team members to help keep employees on track and increase chances their performance will improve. A weekly or monthly casual meeting is sufficient to discuss achievements or issues; more formal meetings can then take the form of a simple overview.

"If you have a performance review once every year it's really just a summary," she says.

Deal with issues as they arise, Stoudt suggests, whether it's a job well done or a setback with a project. However, she says, at the very minimum, "a direct supervisor and his or her employee should have a sit down meeting at least twice a year."

> Look ahead
A constructive performance review looks to the next year in addition to the one that just passed. Motivate team members by discussing their goals, says Pau. "Ask: 'What are your goals for the next year? What are some areas you want training in? What are some areas we can help support you in?'"

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