

# Effective Performance Reviews

By Barbara Brown

**Overview:** The performance review is the most powerful productivity improvement tool in a manager's bag. The goal of performance appraisal is to establish clear expectations, reinforce good performance, and improve unsatisfactory performance. Performance reviews are essential components of effective management. So, it is very important to get it right. Informal performance reviews and feedback should be done as often as necessary – even weekly or monthly. But formal reviews, those that are placed in an employee's personnel file, are usually done at least annually.

The formal employee performance review should be conducted in private with sufficient time to cover the issues, the accomplishments, and the expectations. If an employee is asked to change a behavior or improve performance, the reviewing supervisor should schedule a follow-up meeting at an appropriate interval, but no later than 90 days, to check results.

The performance review should not be confrontational; it is not you against your employee. This is the chance to talk honestly about the organization and the employee's role in its profitability. The review should communicate concisely what was expected and how the employee performed. The supervisor should also listen. The performance review should not be one-way communication. If you believe that employees want to do a good job, then you want to know what is interfering with their performance. Feedback from the employee may provide insight into project or system failures that are negatively impacting productivity across the board.

**Approaches that do not work:** The single biggest problem with many performance reviews is the failure to state performance expectations in behavioral terms. Telling the employee to work smarter or do better helps neither the employee nor the organization. Another technique that will not improve performance is using absolutes in the review - phrases such as "no one", "everyone", "always", or "never" are usually incorrect and unbelievable on their merit.

Do not use performance or behavioral criteria that are not related to the employee's job. And, do not add evaluation criteria that come as surprise to the employee. The criteria on which job performance is assessed should be provided to the employee at the beginning of his or her employment or task initiation. The final not-to-do is to try and soften a negative review in order to avoid conflict. If you must provide less than favorable feedback, do so honestly and with examples of what is right and what went wrong. Then listen.

**Review approaches that can work for you and the employee:** Have real performance criteria – how much, how long, how well, and at what cost. Be sure that your job performance criteria are attainable and measurable. Although it is not essential, using a corporate standard performance review form makes sure all important areas are addressed and examples provided. Be sure the form allows space for comments not just ratings. It is helpful to have the employee provide input into their own review, before the meeting. The employee's input may remind the reviewer of events or accomplishments that should be considered, differences in perspective about what is expected, or topics for discussion. The employee's formal review should be documented on either the standard review forms or through formal memoranda. Recommended changes in existing behaviors or the addition of new skills should be documented. Finally, be sure to schedule a follow up on any suggested changes in behavior or performance within 90 days.

