

Performance Evaluation: Part 2

In [Performance Evaluation: Part 1](#), we discussed why we do performance evaluations. In this second article, we will discuss how the leader can be the bearer of bad news without destroying either the output or ego of his/her employee, and how to make performance evaluation meaningful to both parties.

To review, performance evaluations should be a tool to help people grow. It is one tool, not the only tool, and it is a powerful one--if done correctly. First, we make the assumption that the leader and the employee have met prior to the start of the evaluation period and agreed upon a set of [SMART](#) goals. Second, these are then measured over the evaluation period (say, 6 months) with a set of agreed upon metrics and usually charted or otherwise displayed. Whether or not the goals are achieved can readily be ascertained with reference to the data. This method eliminates any subjective evaluation and surprises.

If a goal was achieved, we ask why? Was it due to something we did, e.g., a process refinement, more experience (less time to complete a task as tasks are repeated), or just luck? If we did not achieve a goal, again we ask why? Do we need to improve the process? Was the goal unrealistically high? Did circumstances beyond our control alter the environment (e.g., Hurricane Katrina)? Or were we just unlucky? The answers to these questions may not be readily apparent and the employee should come to the evaluation with data to explain why goals were or were not achieved.

When goals are not achieved, leaders have the opportunity to teach, coach, and help employees to improve their performance. Remember to critique the work not the individual. A servant-first leader always has the other person's needs in mind and truly wants them to succeed. In other words, you must be clear that you are not saying "you are a bad/lazy/unskilled person," rather "that your output can be improved by doing the following ...". Nearly everyone wants to improve, develop expertise, and have a sense of satisfaction in their work. It is up to you, the leader, to create an environment where people can achieve job satisfaction and feel they are an important part of the "team."

As we discussed in [Part 1](#), no one, leaders included, likes to tell people "[bad](#)" news. However, that is an important responsibility for leaders. You are not doing your people favors by not telling them when they are making mistakes or not working up to expectations. *How* you tell them will determine what they do about what you say. Do not be confused with a leader's responsibility to maintain discipline and performance evaluation. Discipline problems must be addressed separately and immediately and according to a published set of rules governing conduct. For instance, a person who is frequently late to work is a discipline problem and must be handled according to organizational policy and work rules. Job performance is what we are discussing here and it is distinct from discipline.

If we have been measuring goal performance during the evaluation period, the leader should not wait until the formal evaluation to coach, teach, demonstrate, or suggest ways to improve output especially when it appears that output is not on track to achieve a goal. He/she should be aware, at least on a monthly basis, whether output is on, behind, or ahead of schedule and provide input to improve performance, as needed. The formal performance evaluation provides a time when the two parties can sit down and discuss, analyze and evaluate goal performance. Where goals were not achieved even after frequent input from the leader, a detailed process evaluation may be called for.

If the performance evaluation is to be truly effective, it must be non-threatening. That means that discussion of pay or promotion should be done separately from this meeting. When people know that a raise or promotion is on the line, they will not be as forthcoming about their own inadequacies, lack of training or understanding. If you want the evaluation to be more than just a one-way conversation, divorce pay/promotion from performance.

Finally, the setting for the discussion is important. Again, it should be non-threatening. Few leaders go to the extremes that [Admiral Rickover](#) was famous for, (allegedly he sat behind a desk on a raised dais and the poor petitioner was seated in an uncomfortable chair where the two front legs had been shortened, facing him), but even subtle hints can create anxiety in the evaluatee. Both parties should be on equal ground, e.g., adjacent easy chairs, and the leader needs to begin to put the employee at ease by warmly welcoming them by name. Initially asking questions about family, a recent vacation or the like can help to reduce anxiety. When it appears that the person is relaxing, I recommend that the evaluator begin by asking him/her how *they* think their (evaluation period) has gone? Most people will be brutally honest and much tougher on themselves than you will be. After listening to their response and perhaps asking a few questions, I recommend the leader sum up the person's performance in a few sentences. (Some like to do the summation at the end of the evaluation but doing it first tends to remove fear, especially when they hear good news!)

Begin by telling the person something positive about their performance. Just as no one likes to hear bad things *everyone* likes to hear good things about themselves. By beginning with positive comments people will be listening to what you say. We all get defensive when confronted with criticism of our performance and some will simply stop listening if the leader begins with negative feedback. After telling them the "good" then move on to the "other."

When critiquing performance that is not meeting standards or goals, remember to be objective and avoid appearing to attack the individual. Demonstrate by your words and body language that you respect the person being evaluated and want the best for them. Offer suggestions and work with the person to develop a plan for achieving their goals. Set a time to get back together again, normally within the next two weeks, to review the plan. Try to end the meeting on a high note assuring the person that you support them and want them to excel.

With proper planning, courage to tell the truth and a genuine concern for the welfare of their people, servant leaders can transform performance evaluations from something dreaded by both parties into a learning experience. Don't be surprised if you, the leader, are the real learner!

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