

## “Performance Reviews: A Guide for Managers”

Annual performance reviews can be stressful for both employees and managers. Here are some simple but effective tactics to help minimize your employees' anxiety and ensure reviews are both fair and effective:

- **Explain the process ahead of time.** Ideally, whenever you hire an employee you should explain the details of the performance review process—how often these meetings occur, how they are conducted, and what the employee can expect during the discussion. Put these details in writing for easy reference. This way, the review conversation will have a structure that is clear to both you and your employee.
- **Schedule the review together.** Some employers blindside their workers by springing a review on them without much advance notice. This is a poor tactic, as it puts the employee on the spot and denies them the opportunity to think through their accomplishments, objectives, and questions. A far better approach is to schedule the meeting with the employee in advance and even share your proposed conversation agenda ahead of time. The employee will come into the room feeling prepared and confident, and will be much more inclined to engage in an honest, productive conversation with you.
- **Flag any trouble spots in advance.** If you unleash a series of aggressive questions and complaints regarding a performance shortfall during the actual meeting, you are sure to get a defensive, underdeveloped response in return. Difficult as it might be to talk with an employee about their inability to hit their professional marks, it is much more awkward when they enter the review under the mistaken impression that things are fine. A smart tactic is to tip them off before the date of the review by saying something to the effect of "We'll need to discuss why goals X, Y, and Z were not met this year. Please come into the conversation having given that some thought, so that we can work together on a solution."
- **Have employees conduct self-reviews.** In addition to the traditional manager-delivered review, an employee self-review is a new and viable alternative that is becoming more and more prevalent in the workplace. Consider having your employee provide you with a self-review in advance of your formal meeting. You can gain valuable insight into what the employee is thinking and use this to craft your later discussion.
- **Bring reviews into the round.** Rather than have a one-way review process (a manager reviewing an employee), consider a "360 degree review" in which the employee also has the opportunity to evaluate your effectiveness as a manager. Have the employee fill out a brief questionnaire rating your management skills. Or you can simply alert the employee in advance that, during the review, the floor will be open to a discussion regarding your management techniques—what works

for the employee and what doesn't. Encourage the person to suggest ways that you could manage them more effectively going forward. In addition, invite your employee to create a "wish list" of how he or she might expand upon or develop his or her job duties.

- **Don't begin on a down note.** It is important to keep in mind that your opening remarks will set the tone for the rest of the meeting. Starting a review by diving immediately into the employee's failings is a sure way to start the conversation off on a sour note and set up a barrier between the two of you. Even if you must analyze performance shortcomings, a better approach is to initiate the conversation by highlighting the positive aspects of the employee's performance over the past year. The eventual conversation about what is not up to snuff will feel less dire, and, as a result, the employee will be more likely to listen and work with you toward a solution.
- **Hatch a plan.** A review shouldn't simply be about rating an employee's performance. It should be a springboard from which the employee can grow and advance in the company. For every criticism, provide suggestions on how he or she could improve in the coming year. Working together, develop tactical, concrete approaches to overcome shortcomings. Let the employee see that you are interested in helping them develop and succeed. Inspire them to excellence by indicating that improvements will be rewarded with enhanced responsibilities. Knowing that your manager is on your side can be a powerful motivator.
- **Don't let the conversation stop.** A formal review meeting is a good opportunity to stop and "check in" with your employee, but you should also strive to sustain an ongoing conversation about job performance throughout the year. By making the review process less formal, communication between the manager and the employee will improve. Allow the employee some time to ponder what was said during the review meeting, and then come back to the table to discuss any resulting questions or ideas that may not have come to mind during the initial conversation.