

Seven Tips to Deal with a Negative Performance Review

Q. "I wasn't happy with my last performance review. Should I dispute the review? Write a letter for my file? Talk to a lawyer? Or just let it go?"

A. Most professionals feel you should offer some kind of response. But whether to respond, and the way to respond, will depend on your company's culture, the unwritten message, and your own career goals.

1. Assess your report in light of the company's culture.

In some cultures, anything but glowing praise will be viewed as negative. In others, tough reviews are the norm.

Often your boss will be expected to come up with at least one point of constructive criticism. After all, nobody walks on water. But if you're being attacked or unfairly criticized, you must explore further.

Sometimes you'll win more points by taking the review in stride than by fighting. But in some cultures, a single negative review means you need to start job-hunting right away.

2. Calculate your boss's strategy.

Sometimes your performance report has nothing to do with you or your performance. Your boss might honestly want to see you leave the company or make sure the next promotion goes to someone else.

Your boss may be a new hire who is still learning your company's culture. She may combine good intentions with weak implementation.

Or maybe your boss wants to get your attention: he's dropped hints and you've ignored them. Or he wants to help you progress but doesn't know how to communicate tactfully.

3. Listen for unwritten messages.

Does your company have a category where a low score means you're headed for disaster? Does your boss try to tell you, "It's a great review!" when you know otherwise?

Suppose you've been getting terrific reviews -- and now you get slammed with a truckload of criticism. Maybe you really did have a bad year. Or maybe there's an agenda you need to understand.

4. Get the facts without getting defensive.

Ask your boss to explain each criticism.

For example, if your boss said your project was delivered late, get dates and times. If you're criticized for interpersonal skills, ask for specific instances.

But give your boss a chance to save face.

Anyone can make mistakes. An overworked, harried boss can skimp on her own data collection. You can

say, without confrontation, "My records show I managed six projects, not four. Can we go over this point?"

5. Delay your response.

Ask for a second meeting, explaining calmly that you need time to think. Use the time to collect your backup file. Consider a consultation with an outsider: career coach, consultant, human resources professor -- even a lawyer if the situation warrants.

Do not discuss your report or your decision to seek help with your peers. Ever.

6. Back up a rebuttal with facts, not emotion.

Assemble your own evidence of performance. Collect letters of appreciation, dates and times of project completion, statistics showing how you helped the company.

Often simply placing a rebuttal letter in your own file will defuse the impact of a negative evaluation. When you've had a strong track record, your company will ignore an occasional negative, unless there's a new agenda.

Your boss may be ordered to grade on the curve, i.e., assign some employees the "low" category even if everyone's doing great. And, being human, he may assign those ratings to those who are least likely to speak up. A strong, carefully written rebuttal will clarify your strength of purpose.

7. Avoid jumping to conclusions — or to a new job.

When clients ask, "Should I look for a new job?" my answer will be, "When you work for any organization, keep yourself marketable. Maintain your network. Identify reputable recruiters and build ties with them."

It's rarely a good idea to share your career change plans with your colleagues or boss until you have a written offer in hand. And it's rarely a good idea to accept a counter-offer from your present company. (Over half the workers who accept a counter-offer are gone within six months, one way or another.)

But if your company wants to send a "Go Away!" message, they may be happy to give you a good reference that reflects your real contribution.

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