

Beat performance (review) anxiety

New managers need to thoroughly prepare and show respect for employees

BY CAITLIN CRAWSHAW, FREELANCE FEBRUARY 28, 2009



A successful performance review starts with good preparation, says Angela Merriott, human resources leader at Edmonton's Shaw Pipe Protection.

Photograph by: Rick MacWilliam, The Journal, Freelance

It's that time of year again -- but this time, you won't be the nervous employee sweating bullets and chewing his nails in the boss's office.

Nope, it's even worse. As a new manager, you'll be on the other side of the table, assessing each and every one of the employees you oversee. It's a new responsibility that may be keeping you up nights, anticipating hostile reactions from defensive staffers who, in some cases, may once have been your peers.

There's a simple reason that new managers dread this process, says Angela Merriott, human resources leader at Edmonton firm Shaw Pipe Protection.

"People struggle with taking constructive criticism, which is where I think the root (of this anxiety) comes from," she says. "When you struggle with taking it, it's really hard to give it to someone else."

This discomfort causes many new managers to skip the tough conversation in favour of a watered-down, friendlier version, says Merriott. "It's easier for people to say, 'Hey, you did a great job!'

whether it's based in reality or not."

But even the best worker has something they need to improve on and that's the entire point of a performance review -- to address weak spots and create a plan for professional growth. It's good for the team, the company and even the employee, who need to know what's expected of them and how they can succeed.

A successful performance review starts with good preparation. You, as the manager, need to thoughtfully assess the employee's strengths and weaknesses. Many companies have employees fill out their performance appraisals ahead of time and present them to the manager a week before their meeting.

It's a good practice that allows the manager to identify gaps in communication and involves the employee in the process, she says.

Andreas Hesse, an HR consultant based in Vancouver, says it's crucial that performance reviews be treated as a two-sided conversation.

"There shouldn't be a drastic change in tone from how you've been interacting with your employee to now," says Hesse, adding that this will only create stress on both sides.

At the meeting, managers should allow employees to talk about their own performance, set goals for the year and help decide professional development plans.

It's also a great opportunity to get an insider's view on what the company could be doing better. "Often managers only ask at an exit interview, when the employee already has one foot out of the door. But, if you're having these conversations regularly, the employees and manager can make improvements."

Treating this conversation as a "two-way street" makes employees feel respected and can help a new manager earn respect, in turn.

"That really improves the working relationship between a manager and staff," he says.

While these strategies can help the conversation go smoothly, there's always a chance an employee will become emotional if they hear something they don't like. When this happens, the best course of action isn't to ignore the reaction, but to talk about it, says Hesse.

"It's important to understand the reason for the emotional outburst, to deal with it and acknowledge it ... and bring it back to the manager's agenda," he says.

If this doesn't work, plan to finish the meeting after the employee has had a chance to cool down. Make sure that you follow up with the employee the next day to see how they're doing. If you don't

deal with it, they may start gossiping with their colleagues about the experience, which can create anxiety among those who haven't had their performance review yet, says Merriott.

Both experts agree that conducting a performance review is easier when the manager has given feedback throughout the year -- both informally and formally. In fact, many companies now provide more than one performance appraisal during the year, Merriott says. "Companies are going towards a formal twice-a-year process and having informal discussions on a monthly basis."

She adds that this is a great way to retain "A-people" who may leave a company if they aren't getting consistent feedback. It also makes performance evaluations less stressful for both employees and managers.

"If you're consistently providing feedback, correcting behaviours when you see them and providing positive feedback when there's change, there shouldn't be nerves going into (a performance appraisal)."

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