



## Preparing for the Appraisal Meeting

Excerpt from Chapter 8 of “How to Be Good at Performance Appraisals,” by Dick Grote (Harvard Business Review Press, July 2011).

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### Get Everything Ready

There are a couple of important elements to arrange in advance of the performance appraisal meeting. The usual recommendations for preparing for the appraisal discussion are well known:

*Gather all your materials:* In addition to the performance appraisal document itself, you'll want to have performance notes you've made during the course of the year and other support materials close at hand in case they're needed.

*Select an appropriate place for the meeting:* You sitting directly behind your desk may not be the ideal setting, unless you're delivering the performance appraisal of a marginal performer.

*Choose a convenient time:* It might be a good idea to ask the employee what time would be most convenient for her.

Be cautious about conducting the meeting anywhere outside the normal business setting. One supposed authority on performance appraisals offers some strikingly bad advice: “From personal experience, I believe it's best to complete appraisals at a site other than the workplace. You want to be in a comfortable and relaxed setting and not be bothered by interruptions.” Perhaps this author might find his local pub will provide the recommended “comfortable and relaxed setting,” with the only interruption being the bartender's question, “Another round?”

Don't do it. It's a bad place for an appraisal discussion. A performance review is a business meeting. Hold it in a business setting—your office, an available empty office, or a conference room.

### The Myth of “No Surprises”

Managers are universally advised that there should be no surprises during the course of a performance appraisal discussion and are scolded that, if the employee reacts with surprise to any point the manager makes, the manager hasn't done his coaching job properly during the year. That's another example of well-intentioned but poorly thought-out advice.

There often will be surprises in a performance review. The process of writing a formal performance appraisal will bring to mind some problem areas the manager wasn't aware of—or didn't realize the magnitude of—until she gave the individual's performance the close scrutiny the process demands. She's then in the awkward position of either deciding not to mention a piece of important information because she hadn't previously discussed it with the individual, or rushing to discuss it before the meeting for no reason other than to meet the artificial goal of avoiding a surprise during the review discussion.

It's better to recognize that the information is important and, therefore, must be discussed, even though it only came to light during the construction of the appraisal. The only honorable course is to include the information, even though it will come as a surprise to the individual when he reads the assessment. In bringing it up, tell the simple truth: "James, I'm sorry I didn't discuss this with you earlier in the year, but I only realized the importance of this issue when I was writing your performance appraisal. I bring my concerns to you as soon as I'm aware of them, and, in this case, now is the time."

Another reason there often will be surprises during appraisal discussions is the infinite human capacity for denial. The manager may very well have given the person important information and specific coaching during the year, only to be told in the appraisal discussion, "You never told me that." The fact that the manager may be able to prove he did discuss the problem area with the individual is irrelevant. Every manager has heard the excuses: "I never thought you were serious." "If it was all that important, why didn't you let me know you felt so strongly? Why did you wait until my performance appraisal to talk to me about this?"

The fact is, the manager didn't wait. He discussed it with the individual several times, at a level of seriousness he was sure would have gotten the message across. But denial is a well-honed human capability, and it's very likely to show up during the performance review. Put the blame where it belongs: "I'm sorry you didn't understand how important this was when we discussed it during the year. I hope in the future you'll pay closer attention to what I tell you."

### **Preparing for the Appraisal Discussion with a Marginal Employee**

If the appraisal you're about to discuss is for a marginal employee—a person whose rating is a 1 or a 2 on a 5-level scale—many of the suggestions I made earlier in this chapter need to be disregarded.

You still will get confirmation that the low rating you've assigned is accurate through the calibration session and your review of the appraisal with your boss. In fact, you may get additional examples that will reinforce the low rating you've decided on and suggestions on how to conduct the session.

Don't give the person a copy of the appraisal an hour in advance. You want the employee to get the message directly from you while the two of you are sitting together. Allowing the person an hour to come up with all her counter-arguments is only going to make the discussion more difficult. Skip listing the successes the person has had over the year. You need to present

a clear, unqualified message that the individual's performance must be corrected immediately and that the change must happen straight away.

The appropriate place for the meeting is your office, with you behind your desk and the employee directly in front of you—the full-power position.

The “convenient time” may well be the end of the day. The blunt nature of the message you're about to deliver may cause a strong emotional reaction, and it may be best for the employee to avoid the embarrassment of trying to resume work as though completely calm while fighting back tears. Even a person who's going to be fired deserves to be treated with dignity. Treating the person compassionately while delivering a tough shape-up-or-ship-out message may preclude inappropriate behavior or thoughts of a lawsuit.

Finally, schedule the performance appraisal discussion of the marginal performer as one of the last ones you hold, not one of the first. Don't tell yourself that since this one will be tough, it's best to get it out of the way early. It's not. Conducting performance appraisal discussions effectively is a skill that grows with practice. Get some practice climbing the foothills before you take on the mountain.

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