

# Helping Managers Hold Difficult Conversations

By Dick Grote

There's probably no better way for human resource professionals to make themselves heroes to line managers than to come to their rescue when those managers have to hold a difficult conversation with one of their team members. Managers look to us in HR to provide solid help and guidance when they have to bring up an unpleasant matter. They want us to tell them exactly how to confront a touchy situation confidently. They expect us to know the exact words to say to open the discussion and deal successfully with a distasteful subject. They want us to give them step-by-step guidance in navigating hypersensitive interpersonal waters.

Of course, a lot of managers don't actually want our help in telling them what to say. The truth is, they'd much prefer that we come to their rescue by taking the burden off their shoulders completely and volunteering to have the difficult conversation with the employee. "You're the HR expert," the manager will say. "You talk to her!"

That's a trap that every HR pro has learned to avoid. Holding tough conversations is not our responsibility—it's the line manager's job. If we allow that burden to be pawned off on us, then we're undermining the manager's authority, even though he may be happy for us to do it. Our job is to be the skilled and knowledgeable coach. The manager's job is to deliver the bad news or raise the disagreeable subject directly.

Two of the most common arenas in which the need for a difficult conversation arises are performance appraisal and performance improvement. Most managers would rather endure a colonoscopy than deliver a less-than-stellar performance review. And if an employee's performance isn't up to par, some supervisors quake in their boots at the thought of having to tell the employee directly that his or her performance or behavior isn't acceptable. And if the problem is genuinely a *personal* one—like telling someone he's got a bad case of body odor—most managers are at a total loss in finding

the right words to say. Let's look at exactly how we can give managers help that they will find helpful.

## What is a Performance Appraisal?

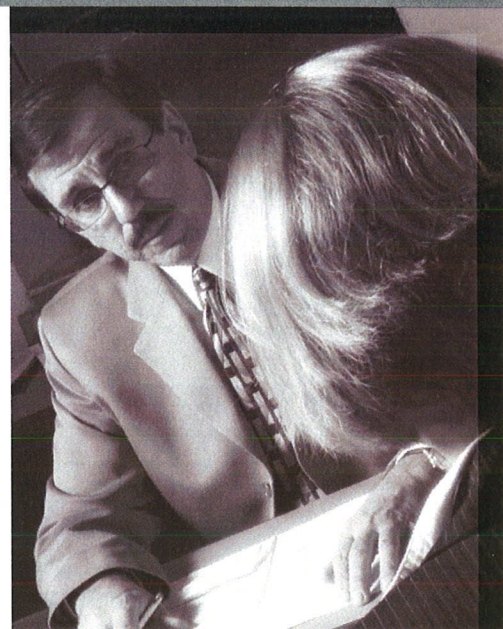
The reason that so many managers have difficulty holding performance appraisal discussions is that they simply don't understand what a performance appraisal is. Let's be clear about this fundamental issue: A performance appraisal is a formal record of a manager's opinion of the quality of an employee's work.

That's right: the performance appraisal documents the manager's opinion about just how good a job Sally or Sam has done over the past 12 months. Will the employee agree with that opinion? Probably not, particularly if the manager has set the performance bar high and maintains tough and demanding standards. And that's okay. The purpose of the performance appraisal discussion is not to gain the employee's agreement with what the manager has written. It is to gain the employee's understanding of exactly how his or her manager has evaluated his contribution to the organization over the past year.

But managers worry that they have to be able to "prove it." They feel that if they can't come up with countable, numerical units to buttress their performance appraisal judgments then the appraisal that they've written is unacceptably subjective and invalid.

Their worries are unfounded. That's what managers are hired to do—to render their opinion. As HR pros we need to tell nervous supervisors that the agency trusts the opinion of managers, and expects them to hold employees to certain standards. If they don't like it, well, that's just tough.

Now if that supervisor's opinion is based on some bias or prejudice, obviously that won't fly and the person could have grounds for a





discrimination lawsuit. But if the manager's opinion is based on her observations of the individual's work performance, there are no grounds for suit.

Attorney and author Rita Risser of the California law firm FairMeasures, Inc., notes in her book, *Stay Out of Court: The Manager's Guide to Preventing Employee Lawsuits*, that the California Court of Appeals recently held that a company cannot be sued over information in a performance evaluation, even if that information is wrong.

"Employers should neither be required to justify performance evaluations by reference to objectively provable facts, nor subjected to fear of liability for good faith, but mistaken, judgments about the value of an individual employee to the business enterprise," said the Court. In other words, even if the manager was wrong, he couldn't be sued. The court also said that "fear of liability stifles management from exercising its fundamental prerogatives to control the workplace and to retain only the best-qualified employees."

So when managers are nervous about delivering their honest but negative opinion in a performance appraisal, we need to tell them "Full-speed ahead!" As long as they can point to examples to support the judgments they've made, they're not only legally home-free but they're also doing exactly what the organization expects them to do.

## Is a Middle Rating "Mediocre"?

Another area where managers need our help is in explaining to an employee who's performed at a fully successful level all year long that his performance appraisal rating is a 3 (or whatever your city or agency uses as a middle rating) in its 5-level rating scale.

Too often people believe that a middle rating in an organization's 5-level rating system is the same as getting a C in a school system's A-B-C-D-F grading procedure. Since the only metaphor they have for what the middle rating represents is what they learned in school, they believe that being rated with the middle rating means that the organization feels their performance is mediocre, second-rate, or run-of-the-mill.

That's not true, of course, and we need to help our managers explain why it's not true. It's not true because a grade of C in a school has no relationship to a middle rating in a municipality's performance appraisal system, particularly when the organization holds people to high expectations.

Here's why it's not true. A school district has to accept every student who lives in that district—it can't exercise any selectivity. The school can't decide to only accept the top athletes, or only those who are smart enough to get into Ivy League colleges. If you live in that school district, the school has to let you in.

But that's not true in organizations. Cities and state agencies exercise a tremendous amount of selectivity. We don't hire everybody who applies; we hire the best we can find. So there's no valid comparison between getting a middle rating in a highly selective organization

and being graded as a C student in a school that has to accept everybody.

Here's a much better and more valid analogy to help your managers explain to their people what the middle rating really represents. It's *par* in golf.

Ask any golfer if he considers shooting par to be the same as being a C student in school. He'll laugh at you. Par is something to strive for; something to be proud of.

Par represents the level of play that's expected of an expert on a course or on a particular hole. And that's what the middle rating in a performance appraisal system represents. Yes, there are people who can shoot better than par, and there are people in organizations who can consistently perform at a superior level. But in both cases, they're the exceptions. If we can explain to managers that awarding someone a middle rating in the agency's performance appraisal system is the same as saying, "You're shooting par," we'll help those managers render more accurate performance appraisals and make their lives easier in explaining what the rating really means.

## Defensive? Long-Tenured? Here's what to Say

Another area where managers seek our coaching is when they have to deliver a performance appraisal to an employee who's more defensive than most, or to one who is highly experienced.

We need to tell the nervous manager not to be overly concerned if an employee is defensive in an appraisal discussion. Defensiveness is part of our genetic makeup; it's hardwired into our nervous system. Defensiveness is a protection mechanism we all use when faced with threat, and it typically comes in one of two varieties: fight or flight.

Employees with an overactive fight defensive reaction can be spotted by their raised voices, their arms folded tightly across their chests, their blaming of others, raising their voices, even pounding the desk. "So what should I do," asks the manager, "when I run into this?"

We need to advise managers to keep calm. It's normal...up to a point. It helps in managing another person's defensive reaction to restate the employee's point of view. Saying something like, "If I understand you, Robert, you feel that..." or "Let me make sure I've heard you right, Sally. You believe that..." can pour oil on troubled waters. Frequently all the individual is seeking is just a chance to be heard. Asking for more information on their perception or restating your understanding of their feelings can bring the fight reaction under control.

But don't forget—you're the boss. If an employee continues with behavior that is inappropriate in a business setting, the manager needs to advise the individual of precisely that fact: "Harry, I know you're upset with the rating I gave you. I'm certainly willing to discuss it with you, but it has to be a professional and business-like discussion. If you aren't able to do that, I'll call this meeting to an

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end.” And if the inappropriate behavior still continues, pull the plug.

*Flight* reactions are entirely different. Here the individual’s voice becomes quieter, not louder. She looks away, turns away. She speaks softly and agrees easily. Here the individual is trying to flee the threatening situation, and the easiest way is simply to agree with whatever is being said, change the subject, and move on.

The temptation for managers is to do just that—move on. But premature agreement doesn’t indicate real understanding. If the manager accepts her hastily offered agreement, it’s unlikely that there will be any genuine commitment to change. The effective supervisor needs to say, “I’m glad we both agree that last year wasn’t your best. Let’s actually go through analyzing what happened last year so we can make sure that the upcoming one will be more successful for you.”

Managers sometimes seek HR’s help when they are about to conduct a performance review with an employee who’s been through the process many times before. Why bother, managers ask. Tell them that the reason they’re doing performance appraisals is because it’s an ethical responsibility of leadership. Every employee in the city or agency, no matter how long he’s worked there, wants the answers to two questions: First, what do you expect of me? Second, how am I doing at meeting your expectations? Just because Sam joined the agency the year before Noah, he still needs those answers. Tell the manager simply to get right to the point and make it more businesslike: “Sam, you’ve been through this many times before. Let’s not waste time on small talk. How do you feel this past year compares with how you’ve done in the past?” Then shut up, listen, and proceed as you would with any other employee.

## Dealing with Performance Problems

Everybody gets a performance appraisal. Only a few ever get involved in conversations dealing with the need for immediate performance improvement. This is the place where HR professionals can be major assets to line managers in equipping them to hold these challenging conversations confidently.

When a manager asks your help before confronting Jane with the fact that she’s not meeting his expectations, start by making sure he’s got a solid fix on the nature of the problem before he begins talking to Jane. First, point out that there are only three kinds of people problems—attendance (coming or not coming to work on time every day), performance (quality and quantity of work), and conduct (following the rules and acting appropriately). Which one of these three areas is the manager’s primary concern? Getting a clear fix on the specific area of concern will help keep the meeting on track if things start to go astray.

The most important service we HR pros can provide managers is to coach them on how to clearly define the difference between the desired performance and the employee’s actual performance. Any

time a supervisor has a concern with one of his people, what he’s essentially saying is that there’s a gap between what he wants the employee to do and what the employee is actually doing. Before the supervisor can ask the employee to close the gap, the supervisor has to be able to specify exactly what the gap is. For example:

**Desired performance:** Be at your workstation every morning, fully prepared and ready to begin work, at 8:00 a.m.

**Actual performance:** In the last three weeks there were four occasions when Denise was more than 10 minutes late to work. (NOT: “She’s always late!”)

**Desired performance:** Only smoke in the company’s designated smoking area.

**Actual performance:** Bill was smoking outside the main entrance to the building. Although he was outside the building, he was not in one of the designated smoking areas. (NOT: “He’s got a bad attitude about following rules.”)

**Desired performance:** Work only on assigned duties while at work. Advise me as soon as assigned projects have been completed. If I am unavailable, provide assistance to coworkers on any of their projects.

**Actual performance:** This morning Margie was in the lunchroom when she should have been working. On two occasions last week she had been doing personal business and was late back from lunch. On 10/16 she was doing her income tax and earlier had been writing letters and making personal phone calls. (NOT: “She spends too much time on personal business.”)

Helping managers get specific in stating exactly what they want and exactly what they get may be difficult, but it’s much more likely that the manager will get the employee to agree to solve the problem if the manager knows before beginning the meeting exactly what the performance gap is.

Speaking of “the meeting,” it’s wise for the HR professional to make sure that the manager knows exactly what the objective for the meeting is before he calls the employee in and begins it. Ask the manager who’s soliciting your help, “What is your objective for the meeting you’re going to have with Carlos?”

You’ll be surprised at how few managers can answer that question correctly. They’ll talk about communicating, about getting the employee to understand, about coming to a common point of view, about having the employee appreciate the importance of the city’s rules, and lots of other nonsense. Listen up: The purpose of the



meeting is to get the employee to agree to solve the problem and get back to doing the job the way the manager and the organization expect it to be done.

Why is getting the employee to agree to change so important? Two reasons. First, the employee who agrees to change (as opposed to being commanded to do as he's told or else!) is more likely to change. More importantly, the manager never knows at the time of the meeting what will happen once it's over. If the manager handles the conversation professionally, the odds are good that the employee will change and get back to doing the job as she should. But if the problem continues and the manager has to talk again, now the manager will have a separate issue to discuss—the employee's failure to live up to the agreement that was made in the original meeting. That's why gaining agreement is so important.

"Okay," the manager asks, "how do I go about getting him to agree to change?" "Simple," you reply. "You gain someone's agreement just by asking for it: 'Denise, I need you to agree that you'll always be at your workstation at 8 a.m.; Bill, I need your agreement that you'll only smoke in the designated smoking areas.'" Remind the manager that all he's asking the employee to do is to agree to do what he's getting paid to do—to perform properly and follow the agency's rules. That's not too high of an expectation.

"But what if the matter isn't something as clear-cut as breaking a rule or not being on time," the manager asks. "What if it's an attitude problem, or the fact that the guy has B.O.?"

Here's where you start really earning your pay. If the manager presents the situation as an "attitude problem," ask her for all the examples she's got of that bad attitude in action. She'll probably have little difficulty presenting a long list of examples, each one of which will be a specific behavior—sometimes overt, sometimes nonverbal ("He rolls his eyes every time I ask him the status of the Tompkins project"). Your advice to the manager should be that he or she should keep track of all the specific physical, verbal, and nonverbal behaviors that are inappropriate and write down the time of each and how often they occur. (This will prevent the employee from later denying what happened.) Then identify the impact of this inappropriate behavior. In other words, answer the "so what?" question. What difference does it make? How does this behavior affect other people's ability to get their work done? What's the effect on citizens? On your department? On you?

Armed with this list, now the manager is ready to talk with the individual. Here's a good opening script that gets right to the point:

- "George, I have a problem." (Saying "I" and not "you" reduces defensiveness.)
- Calmly and factually describe the specific inappropriate behaviors you've observed.
- Say, "Help me understand why this is happening..."
- Shut up and listen.

Remind the manager that what she's listening for are reasons, not

excuses. Determine whether the individual has a logical reason for the apparent inappropriate behavior. Then ask the powerful question, "What are your objectives in doing this?" Asking someone what their objectives are is usually enough to convince the individual that the jig is up and it's time to stop.

And "Stop!" is what the manager needs to actually say. Too often managers complain to us about employee problems, but they don't take the necessary step of saying directly to the individual, "What you are doing is inappropriate. You must stop doing this."

Along with telling the individual to stop engaging in the problem behavior, the manager also needs to tell the person what she needs to start doing: Being courteous, cooperative and helpful. Courteous, cooperative and helpful behavior is a condition of employment for everyone whose job involves public service, and the manager needs to take the initiative in reminding people of that.

## So What About B.O.?


Finally, let's say that the manager is asking for your help in knowing how to deal with an employee with a personal hygiene problem (this is where you really earn your pay!).

Tell the manager to hold the meeting at the end of the day so the employee can leave with little embarrassment as soon as this always-brief meeting is over. Be empathetic ("I know, Bob, that this is a difficult subject to discuss..."), but be blunt ("You have a problem with personal hygiene that must be corrected.").

Tell the manager not to speculate on whatever is causing the problem—you don't want to open the door to a discussion of medical issues that are none of your business—but be prepared to discuss the evidence you have that there truly is a problem and the negative consequences on the work environment. Be prepared for embarrassment, and also be ready for denial or the sudden termination of the conversation with the employee abruptly leaving the premises.

If the individual bolts, that's okay. Hopefully he's on his way home to change clothes or take a shower.

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