

Performance Review 201

How to share unfavorable feedback without alienating employees.

BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL



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Q My organization struggles with giving unfavorable performance reviews. We tend to focus on the positive aspects of an employee's performance and skip over their weaknesses and mistakes. Needless to say, this doesn't bode well for our bottom line. What advice can you offer?

A: Telling someone something they don't want to hear is never easy. At the same time, the costs to the organization and to the parties involved can be high. Moreover, eventually the message—such as being passed over for a plumb assignment or promotion—leaks out in one form or another anyhow, giving you even less ability to manage the employee receiving the feedback.

The best way of handling this challenge is to:

Be direct, compassionate, and open-minded. While taking a few moments to build rapport and set the stage is helpful, it is essential to allocate sufficient time to engaging with the employee's reaction to the feedback.

Transition with a gentle warning. "What I'm about to say may be difficult for you to hear" or "I'm sorry, but I don't have good news." This emotionally prepares the listener for what is to come next and communicates that you understand the gravity of the situation for them.

Proceed with the unfavorable feedback. Try to support any evaluative statements (e.g., "You have

their ability to control the outcome in the future (e.g., "I know you have it in you to make it up next year").

Ask them if they see the situation differently. Many managers shy away from this question, because they feel it's too risky. While there is risk in asking

this question if you don't know how to handle the response, there is risk in not asking it, as well: The employee could leave the company, poison their work environment, besmirch you and the organization, etc. An even bigger risk is that by not asking, you miss important information in your analysis, and you draw the wrong conclusion.

When you ask for the employee's perspective, insist that they support their opinions and conclusions with impartial data and their interpretation of that data. Imagine this employee response in the preceding example: "My numbers are down by 20 percent, because I spent so much time mentoring the three new hires, getting them up to speed four months earlier than usual, and helping the team grow its numbers by 10 percent in a bad economy. I thought I would be rewarded for those things, not penalized."

With the introduction of new data, you might revise your analysis and conclusion. Or, you might interpret the data differently (e.g., "The new staff didn't contribute to the 10 percent growth"). Either way, you would be making a more informed decision, and as long as you respond to the employee's points with independent data and your analyses, the employee should feel he or she has been heard.

Express your sympathy throughout. While your decision might be just, it doesn't mean the impact is any less difficult for the employee. Separate the decision from its impact, and address both: "Based on the data, I can't justify giving you a promotion," and "I'm sorry you're disap-

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been underperforming") with objective data (e.g., "You have generated 20 percent less than the average person in your role"), and be encouraging about

pointed," and "I can only offer promotions based on a business case, which there isn't here," and "I understand this could pose challenges for you." **T**