

# I've Been Thinking about... Performance Reviews

## What to do – and what *not* to do – when reviewing performance

By Martha Golensky

**J**oe joined the Youth Services Department just over a year ago, having impressed the CEO with his positive attitude. Joe did his best to follow the policies and procedures laid out in the Employee Handbook he'd received his first day. His supervisor Marge always had a smile for him when their paths crossed but seldom had time to discuss his concerns.

At his annual review, Joe was shocked to learn he was deemed deficient in four of the 10 key areas in his job description. He was so upset that he could hardly focus on the remedial actions Marge laid out. Thoroughly demoralized, Joe felt his days at the organization were numbered.

This organization made two critical mistakes. To avoid these common traps, remember two keys:

- **Provide feedback on performance, both informal and formal, throughout the year.** If you spot any problems, address them immediately. Don't wait for the annual review.
- **Offer criticism as constructively as possible.** Research shows people dwell on bad news and remember it longer than good news. In the example above, after identifying the four problem areas, the supervisor ought to have emphasized that Joe was doing well in the other six key areas and reassured him his job wasn't on the line. Joe would then be much more receptive to discussing how to improve his performance.

### Secrets to an Effective Review

Rather than seeing the performance review process as a necessary evil, view it as an integral part of staff development. Here are steps to a system that's reliable, valid, and practical:

- **Involve staff directly** in constructing the evaluation tool. Use the person's job description to choose the behaviors you want to measure.
- **Just before the performance review**, the employee and supervisor should complete the evaluation instrument separately. Then, during the review, they can discuss their conclusions, using the time together productively to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Except for goal setting and the development plan for the next evaluation period, it isn't necessary that the parties agree on every dimension.
- **Consider adopting a 360-degree assessment.** Gain input from the employee's subordinates, peers, and supervisor(s)



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anonymously via surveys. Ideally, the executive director will be in the mix. Consider surveying external stakeholders as well. The best feedback comes from those who have known the employee long enough to get past first impressions but not so long that they lose objectivity.

### Sidestep Legal Hassles

Remember that most organizational litigation is employment-related. To forestall legal challenges:

- **Establish clear, written employee policies** that comply with current laws and regulations.
- **Be transparent** about the review process.
- **Adhere to all deadlines** governing the review.
- **Treat everyone alike** in implementing the evaluation criteria. Always be as fair as possible. 

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