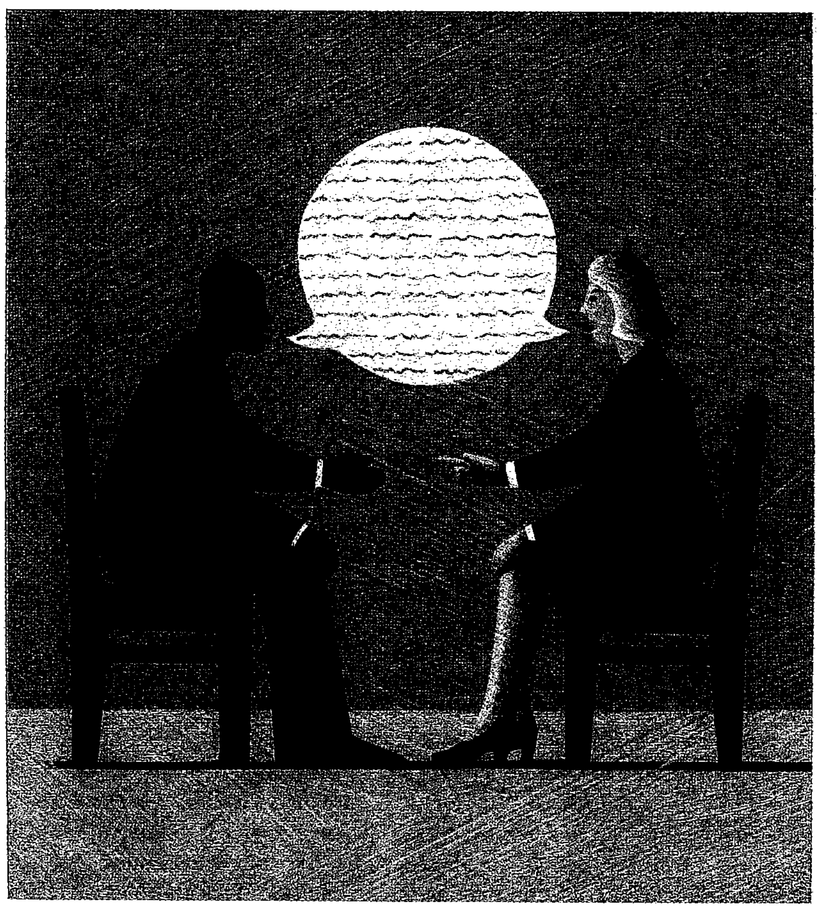
Feedback, Not Appraisal

Constant feedback directs performance and promotes a healthier supervisor-employee relationship.

By Christopher D. Lee

Traditional performance appraisals are ineffective tools for increasing employee productivity. As a matter of fact, they are ineffective by design. Performance appraisals are branded under the umbrella of performance *management*, a term that denotes something that is ongoing. But, in fact, appraisals are usually only designed to document past performance. The only performance that can be managed is present and future performance, and feedback is the vehicle by which to communicate it.



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Feedback is the exchange of information about the status and quality of work products. It provides a road map to success. It is used to motivate, support, direct, correct and regulate work efforts and outcomes. Feedback ensures that the manager and employee are in sync and agree on the standards and expectations of the work to be performed.

Traditional appraisals, on the other hand, discourage two-way communication and treat employee involvement as a bad thing. Employees are discouraged from participating in a performance review, and when they do, their responses are often considered "rebuttals."

To reverse this, successful performance management must contain a healthy degree of feedback and employee involvement.

An ideal approach to performance management would be a system of structured *feedback* used to manage, regulate and improve performance. Feedback is a requirement for effective management whether or not a formal evaluation system is in place.

Appraisal Is Not Feedback

Employees want feedback, not appraisal. While there may be some small similarities between the two, feedback and appraisal are fundamentally different activities. Feedback is information, while appraisal is judgment or evaluation. Feedback is an immediate, ongoing activity that is not contingent on any-thing else. Appraisal is event-based and usually occurs on a designated interval—such as semi-annually or annually—that is retrospective, and it is often linked to pay or other rewards.

Feedback is usually offered verbally, while appraisals are written down. Feedback tends to be perceived as neutral, while the judgment provided in appraisals often causes fear and other emotional reactions. Understanding and appreciating the differences is an imperative in effective performance management.

There is no substitute for frequent performance information shared between an employee and his manager. If an appraisal is the only source of feedback, then it misses many interim opportunities for managing and directing future performance and behavior. In any event, the emphasis should be on the sharing of information instead of the evaluation itself.

Feedback Is Performance Management

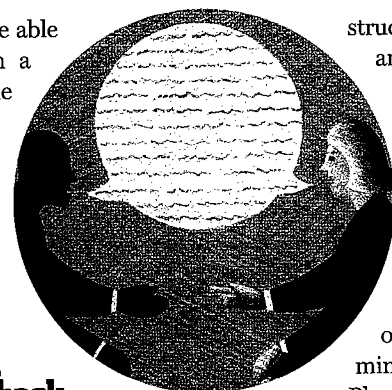
In the classic management book *Putting the One Minute Manager to Work* (Berkley Trade, 1988), Ken Blanchard and Robert Lorber share the wisdom that "feedback is the breakfast of champions." So, each employee may need a daily dose—or as much as is practical.

Frequent informal conversations about work can be as effective as any formal evaluation system. The frequent interaction creates the opportunity to talk about important matters, solve performance challenges as they occur and make adjustments where necessary. Feedback is the primary tool used to provide employees with information and guidance.

When managers share enough accurate information with employees about the quality and quantity of their work, employees are more likely to fully understand what is needed to continue good performance, correct poor performance or improve on mediocre performance. Summarized information that does not describe the full measure of performance may present a partial or skewed picture of performance. This narrow view is often the subject of negative reactions from the employee.

Feedback is also two-way communication that provides managers with clues about how they are aiding or hindering their subordinates' work. Supervisors who actively solicit feedback from their subordinates discover obstacles to their success and are able to remove them in a timely fashion. The best way to find solutions to common problems is to collaborate, and this collaboration requires conversation.

Continuous feedback is required for increased productivity and successful partnerships.



Frequent And Planned Feedback

Frequent interaction and information exchanges build relationships. When big challenges are presented, the environment of dialogue (and hopefully trust) is already established. This makes it easier to discuss and deal with real issues when they occur. The sooner the supervisor intervenes, the better. Midyear or annual corrections are too infrequent to manage performance optimally.

Periodic feedback sessions give the manager and employee multiple opportunities to calibrate and recalibrate their joint efforts. Like two paths diverging, the longer it takes between the time the manager and employee speak about a performance anomaly, the greater the distance will be between planned and actual performance improvement. Continuous feedback is required for increased productivity and successful partnerships.

While most feedback should be informal, impromptu, on-the-spot and close to the time of the actual performance, there is a need for planned feedback as well. Planned feedback opportunities keep both the employee and the manager honest. When there is difficult information to share, unplanned feedback sessions are often delayed or avoided. Problems can only be avoided for so long, and successes can be reinforced and celebrated sooner, when structured feedback sessions are placed on the calendar at periodic intervals. Some experts recommend holding feedback sessions, called progress reviews or "check-ins," every six to eight weeks, bimonthly, quarterly or on some other previously determined schedule.

Planned progress reviews create an opportunity to step back from the current operations to discuss root causes instead of symptoms. They ensure that important information is shared and work issues are addressed. Planned feedback sessions can become a built-in system of accountability for the employee and the manager.

Negative Feedback In Small Doses

One advantage of frequent interactions is that problems are discovered earlier, corrections are made sooner, and they are, therefore, less dramatic. Similar to getting treatment for a serious illness before it spreads throughout the body, early intervention is always positive. Just as with medicine, smaller doses of a toxic substance over a long period of time may treat a condition, whereas one large dose could be fatal.

Managers who rely on appraisal as their primary management tool are known to save up a year's worth of criticism and give it to the employee in one big dose at the annual performance evaluation. This approach may be catastrophic for some employees. Employees may leave (or be terminated) upon finding out that they have been unknowingly under-performing for 10 months.

Negative feedback is unavoidable. Yet, it can be a positive element in helping employees grow and improve. Supervisors can manage the dosage of negative feedback by giving it in small, manageable doses. When negative feedback is given during a regular feedback session vs. once at an annual appraisal, the employee has the opportunity and time to digest the information and make corrections.

Furthermore, it is usually not possible to change poor performance with one correction or conversation. Human behavior does not respond like a machine with an on-and-off switch. The more probable scenario will involve multiple conversations and interventions to move human behavior toward a newer but more desirable equilibrium.

Coaches, Not Judges

Many managers are reluctant to give an employee critical feedback for fear that it will harm the relationship and their future ability to work with that person. It is a difficult task for managers to balance the roles of serving as both a coach and a judge; employees have difficulty reconciling these often-conflicting roles as well.

Judges are impartial and removed third parties that weigh evidence based on objective criteria. They give their ruling and are never seen again. They do not have to live or work with the people about whom their judgments were made. Supervisors have to maintain a positive but, most important, a productive relationship with the person for whom they have passed judgment. In reality, it is a difficult and delicate task to give criticism without some negative fallout. W. Edwards Deming, Rick Maurer, Alfie Kohn and other experts have argued that giving constructive criticism, even when it is accurate, can cause performance to spiral downward because of employees' emotional reaction to the criticism.

Employees want feedback delivered in a coaching fashion with clear improvement plans. When judgment is removed from feedback, information is more likely to be received in the spirit in which it was intended. Coaching supports peak performance. It helps to build and maintain a relationship with the employee that is a partnership instead of one that is adversarial. Judgment can be reserved for annual ratings—though some would argue that effective supervision and frequent feedback would negate the need to have formal evaluations as a tool to manage performance.

Conversations, Not Evaluations

Constructive feedback given in the form of ratings is often counterproductive because ratings in their purest form are simply judgments. Many people react to ratings rather than hear the important information located behind the rating. Performance interventions must give the employee enough information about improvement points and the right amount of support to change them. Improved performance occurs only through proper coaching, guidance, training and employee support. The requirement for improved performance is open and honest dialogue—performance conversations.

Such conversations are based on an exchange of information—feedback. This feedback should be built on shared information that describes problems, challenges, issues, ideas and opportunities. This information is then used to diagnose problems, reinforce successes or generate plans for improvement. Only through dialogue is enough information shared to ensure understanding. This stands in contrast to past-oriented ratings that are conclusive and that thwart information sharing. Many successful organizations such as SAS, Del Taco and countless others in retail, manufacturing, sales and other industries either do not perform formal evaluations at all or choose to use coaching, individual development plans or other feedback systems as an alternative to appraisals.

A New Performance Management System

Human resource managers would be wise to audit their performance management systems to ensure that they allow for a proper amount of discourse. Replacing or revamping your system is in order if it does not contain employee involvement and a future-oriented *process* to share feedback. Using progress reviews or half-hour check-in sessions at periodic intervals throughout the year would create enough opportunities to uncover problems, reinforce successes or find ways to improve.

Managers and employees must work together, talk with one another and collaborate to produce optimal results. Traditional systems that are one-dimensional and built on supervisor judgments alone will likely miss their intended mark—performance improvement. A system that is intentionally designed to generate information and feedback about work activities will guarantee positive outcomes because effective communication is the key to increasing productivity. HR

Christopher D. Lee, Ph.D., SPHR, is an HR practitioner, lecturer, researcher and author. His new book, *Performance Conversations: An Alternative to Appraisal* (Fenestra Books, 2006), outlines a structured feedback and supervision system that uses continuous dialogue and adjustments to manage work efforts, outcomes and behaviors. He can be reached via his web site at www.performanceconversations.com.