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## Performance Review Anxiety

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**The Recorder**

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A March 13, 2006, article in the *Wall Street Journal* ("In the Lead" by Carol Hymowitz) lamented the end, or at least the reduction in, mentoring and performance feedback. Managers (and that includes anyone in a law firm who has authority and responsibility for someone else's work) claim they are short-staffed, have more people to manage, and must produce more non-managerial work. The gist is there isn't enough time and the best that a manager can do is an ex post facto analysis: monitor behavior as best he can and correct it after it goes bad.

Although the above argument has some merit, the truth is that managers rarely like to review performance and now have a more believable excuse than before. They now can add "I have too many employees" to the long list that already contained "I have clients to take care of," "It's too cumbersome," and "They don't want to hear what I have to say."

But the problem runs much deeper. First, most managers don't want to do performance reviews because reviews can cause conflict. The employee doesn't agree and the manager is not well-trained in reducing conflict. "What do I do or say when someone disagrees with me? How do I gain some agreement for the future?" are internal questions that reflect this lack of training.

The second, deep-rooted impediment to performance reviews is less obvious. Most employees in a firm — especially new associates (and even managers) — will tell you they want feedback, especially when there's a problem. But there is, paradoxically, another part of them that doesn't want feedback because it can be personally painful and expose potentially embarrassing organizational deficiencies that contribute to poor performance. This is the aspect of performance reviews that is rarely addressed.

In personal services firms — law, accounting, engineering and medical practices — the organizational structure and professional expectations limit feedback even more after an employee achieves partnership or tenure. The assumption here is that partners are independent operators who either don't need or want feedback; or that those ostensibly responsible for their "review" don't believe it's professionally appropriate to mention a partner's limitations unless the person is putting the organization at risk. The issues that are acceptable to address in a non-confrontational way include billable hours, new clients brought to the firm and committees the partner has served on. And another paradox in these organizations is that to make partner, associates need regular feedback, which they often don't receive because of the inhibitors mentioned previously.

So let's review the feedback process and see how we might overcome this paradox.

### **EMPLOYEES WANT FEEDBACK**

I recommend that managers ask new employees the following four questions as soon as they begin work:

#### **If you were not performing well:**

1. Would you want to hear about it?
2. When would you want to hear about it?
3. How would you want to hear about it?
4. What would you want to do about it?

#### **The answers always go like this:**

1. Yes.
2. ASAP.
3. Directly, specifically and constructively.
4. Change, fix the problem.

In my 37 years in consulting, the responses to the above questions are the only ones where I get the same responses 100 percent of the time. So what is indicated here is that all employees, managers included, want to know if something is not going well as soon as possible, in a constructive way, and they'd like to fix it. By gaining agreement on the above with your employees, you've established a "Contract for Feedback."

You can also change the above questionnaire to read: "If you *were* performing well." You'll find the answers are uniformly the same — employees want positive

reinforcement that helps them learn and grow. This is also diminished when managers don't have time for feedback.

Since all employees claim they want feedback, the process should be easy. There's an established Contract for Feedback and all a manager has to do is exercise it. Why, then, is the process so difficult? Why do most employees dislike, even abhor, any kind of feedback, formal or informal?

## **THE PARADOX: EMPLOYEES DON'T WANT FEEDBACK**

The Scottish poet Robert Burns lamented, "If only God the gift tie gie us, to see ourselves as others see us." We're a species with a very narrow focus that can't perceive a lot of our own behavior. Going through life with blinders helped us become self-reliant and survive for hundreds of thousands of years where the two main questions often were "Will it eat me or will I eat it." There wasn't a whole lot of time for discussion.

So, there's a natural resistance to feedback. And that's what comprises the paradox: We want feedback yet we don't want it. The resistance largely falls in two categories.

Category 1 deals with our personal fears about who we think we are and what we believe we can do. Most of us have developed healthy egos that let us survive and often thrive. And now, someone comes along and challenges that perception. This is often combined with a fear that we won't be able to rise to the challenge, that we won't be able to change where needed.

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Category 2 deals with organizational issues that exacerbate the self-perception and personal-change challenge. Many managers and employees are unfamiliar with the organization's formal review process or have not sufficiently established an informal review process that is helpful. Plus, employees find themselves inadvertently in the middle of frequently unresolved organizational issues such as low resources, lack of leadership or power struggles between key people. Employees fear that these issues will be reflected unfairly in feedback and that negative consequences will result.

Giving skillful feedback, where the receiver sees the value and reacts with limited defensiveness, is an art, an art at which many managers, due to inexperience or temperament, do not excel. A skillful manager must be aware of what an employee really does, gather information from other sources and present the information in a constructive way that leaves room for a non-defensive and constructive dialogue. This is a very difficult task.

Answer the following questions below on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the highest. Let's get a sense of where your own stress lies concerning feedback. And as part of the initial Contract for Feedback, see where your employee's concerns lie and attempt to address them.

## **WHY DO YOU DISLIKE FEEDBACK?**

### **Personal**

- It's against my self-perception.
- I'm reluctant to challenge my self-perception.
- I fear having weaknesses exposed.
- I fear not being able to change.

### **Organizational**

- I don't know about the organization's performance review system.
- I fear the feedback may be unbalanced.
- I am afraid of being blamed for organizational problems.
- You, as my manager, don't have full knowledge of their work.
- I am afraid of negative consequences.
- I fear managers have poor skills when discussing performance.

## **ADDRESSING THE PARADOX**

Self-reliance for survival was a necessary trait 100,000 years ago. But cooperation and emotional intelligence are more valued in today's workplace. Blindness to our own behavior doesn't work all that well in the work world, where interdependence and reliance on others is necessary to achieve organizational goals.

The key method for overcoming the feedback paradox is to address it directly. When you establish the Contract for Feedback, acknowledge directly that although employees say they want feedback, they also don't want it. Acknowledge that it's an inherently uncomfortable and difficult process, and that both of you have to agree to reinforce the advantages of feedback and to do it regularly because of its benefit despite the pain that may occur.

See if your employees will agree to the following items as part of the Contract for Feedback.

## **OVERCOMING FEEDBACK FEARS**

- I must undergo continuous learning and improvement for effectiveness.
- It's only a "snapshot" of me, not the final statement.

- If unconvinced about the feedback, I could say, "Why might people see me that way?"
- I can hear what I am doing well.
- It's a good opportunity for "getting it on the table."
- My manager may genuinely want to help.

## SUMMARY

Feedback is essential for professional success. We all want to know how we're doing. But we also struggle with feedback because it may be painful, make us feel and look bad, and have serious negative consequences. By addressing this paradox directly, and agreeing that it exists, you will have successfully diffused the underlying issues when you sit down to discuss how things are going.

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