

# IT'S MY REVIEW, and I'll cry if I want to!

How should you handle staff members who respond to critical feedback emotionally?

Maureen Collins, author of the book *Straight Talk – Conversations at Work that Get Results* responds to this dilemma often faced by small business owners, who may lack people management experience...

There are many things that business owners dislike about performance appraisal interviews with staff. One of the most dreaded is when an employee breaks down in tears at the first hint of critical feedback. I'm not talking about a once-off where one party - you - is a little insensitive; and the other - your employee - is a little overly sensitive. This is usually nothing more than a blip in an otherwise good relationship; a blip that tissues, tea and apologies from both parties can fix. I'm talking about employees who, at the drop of a tear, can avoid being held to account for their performance, sometimes for decades.

You'd be wrong if you think that this type of behaviour is the domain of your female employees. Men too, avoid criticism; only they do it with defensive aggressive behaviour. Tears and aggressiveness are two outwardly different behaviours that are used in appraisal discussions with the same purpose: to manipulate you into backing off from giving critical feedback and holding people to account.

The best way to handle this situation is to prevent it from happening at all. There are two ways in which you can minimise the likelihood of tears or aggression:

## 1 Facts first

One way is to prepare for the conversation by gathering facts that describe the performance problem, and to present those facts in a neutral, non-accusing way. For example, if you were talking to someone about the amount of sick leave they take when there is no evidence of any serious disease, you could open the conversation by saying: "I'd like to talk about your attendance." Then you would walk them

through the attendance record that you have obtained before the meeting, drawing attention to any pattern in the days they have been away.

Presenting the facts in this way will allow employees to see why their behaviour is cause for concern. If you adopt an accusatory approach, you will provide an excuse for tears, or for a defensive aggressive response.

## 2 Ground rules

The second way to pre-empt the problem is to agree to ground rules at the start of the conversation. You might say: "I'm going to give you some feedback. It's a little detailed. If you want time to think it through quietly at any point just ask for time out."

## What if this doesn't help?

If, in spite of your care, you are confronted with tears or aggression, remember that the purpose of the conversation is to give feedback. And don't allow yourself to be diverted from that purpose. Rather stop the conversation. If you are dealing with tears it does no harm to offer tissues. Then say something like: "I'm going to give you a few minutes to think about what I've said so that we can talk it through calmly. We do need to get to the bottom of this problem." Then leave your office, with the person still sitting at your desk. The message is clear: you will be back, and you will continue discussing the issue.

If you are firm and consistent in these conversations, and don't allow yourself to be diverted, your employees will quickly learn that you will not be manipulated. **YB**

For more tips on this issue and others like it visit: [www.straight-talk.co.za](http://www.straight-talk.co.za).



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## TIPS FOR PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

Managing the performance of staff is one of the most important roles in management and leadership. Success in this role depends on:

- Clear definition and agreement on the performance that is required for success in a job
- Positive feedback when things go well, to reinforce performance
- Critical feedback on poor performance, to put things back on track
- Agreement on steps that will improve performance in the longer term.