

## How to hold better performance appraisal conversations

How often do you find that you review performance with the same person about the same issues in every performance appraisal, without seeing any improvement? Eventually you give up – and put up with someone whose contribution is way below what you need. When you want behaviour to change you must create accountability.

How often do you find that you talk to the same person about the same sub- standard performance or inappropriate behaviour again and again without seeing any improvement? Eventually you give up – and put up with someone whose contribution is way below what you need.

When you want behaviour to change you must create accountability for it to change - and to stay changed.

Two conditions have to be in place.

- The person is convinced that there's some benefit to them if they make the change.
- They understand there will be consequences if they do - and if they don't.

The first condition creates energy and motivation to get things moving. The second ensures the new behaviour becomes an entrenched habit.

In essence there are four steps to creating accountability. Think of the steps as links in a chain. Each one makes a specific contribution to the process and if all four are in place, behaviour will change. If any one is missing, you can be guaranteed that nothing much will.

Start by clarifying expectations. Make sure the person understands clearly what has to change and why. Be specific. Distinguish between expecting different results and expecting different behaviour. Explain the positive consequences if things change in the right direction ... and the negative consequences if they do not.

If your expectations aren't clear and someone isn't convinced of the need to change their behaviour, they might nevertheless obey your instructions out of fear of being punished if they don't. But you will only have their compliance, without enthusiasm, perseverance or problem solving input.

Step two is to catch the person getting it right and to give them positive recognition and feedback. Don't wait until they go wrong and then criticise. If you don't give positive feedback and reinforcement they'll know you don't care about them. While they may go along with your instructions they will do so with a negative attitude, and you'll hear comments like 'All he cares about are the numbers'.

In step three you give feedback to correct a situation the moment you see something going off track. Explain the gap between what you expect and how the person is performing, and remind them of the positive and negative consequences of their behaviour. If you don't notice and correct deviations from your expectations as soon as you see them, people will stop taking you seriously and will lapse back into their old comfortable habits.

The fourth and final step is to create positive consequences for successful performance, and sanctions for poor performance; then to apply these consequences fairly and consistently. If you don't, everyone will soon realise that there's no reward for making the effort to change – and no punishment for carrying on as before.

Consequences must be applied across the board, no matter how senior or important people are. This can be difficult if the person ignoring the need for change is your most successful salesperson or most valuable technical expert. It's a tough call when you have to insist on a change in behaviour from someone who is bringing in good results: for example a team leader who meets targets but uses an inappropriate management style; or your most creative person who spends too much time on the internet doing personal stuff.

When you use all four steps together you can change a process in which you go around in circles into one of accountability that creates behaviour change.

- Clarify expectations
- Give positive feedback
- Give corrective feedback
- Apply consequences

### **Example of setting expectations with a reluctant employee**

Elizabeth has a key responsibility in the roll-out of a new IT system. She was trained on the software but her manager, Michael, has discovered she has not started on the action plan for her area. 'I'm not going to waste my time on this. I've got too much to do already. It's not going to work' he'd overheard her say.

He needs to talk to her. Telling her what to do won't work. He needs her full commitment to make the changes go smoothly.

In the dialogue below, notice how the Michael creates a safe space for Elizabeth to talk to him, but is also direct in letting her know what he expects of her. He also takes care to acknowledge her experience and how much he values her input. This conversation may be the first of several, in which she and Michael will share their views on the project and come to an agreement on expectations that will ensure her full commitment to the project.

*'I've been wondering what you think of this new project' he began. 'You know the existing systems better than anyone and obviously I'm going to need your help in*

getting the new process running smoothly. But the other day I overheard you say that you thought it wasn't going to work.

Maybe I didn't hear you right, but I wanted to check. If this is how you feel, then I'm concerned. Maybe you're aware of something we're overlooking, or you can see better ways of approaching it. We need to talk it through. How do you see things?'

Michael sipped his coffee and waited for Elizabeth to speak. He wasn't going to rush her. She was silent, looking down at her coffee cup. He waited for another moment and then he said, 'I think I'll have another cup. Can I get you one? Think through my question. I do want us to talk this through so we can iron out any problems before we go further.'

Michael took his time to fetch the coffee and when he returned Elizabeth seemed more relaxed. 'So what do you think?' asked Michael.

Elizabeth hesitated. 'Look, I know I said that, and maybe I shouldn't have. It's just that I've been feeling very pressurized recently. I don't know how I can keep up with all my current workload **and** help implement the new system.'

'OK', said Michael, 'I can understand that. It **is** going to mean double work in the short term. Have you gone through the project plan in detail? Do you understand exactly what's involved and the time scale?'

'Well, no, not in detail' Elizabeth said, looking a bit guilty.

'Would it help if we were to go through it together?' asked Michael. 'Given your experience I'd appreciate your comments. You can also raise any concerns you have as we go along. Would you like to do that?'

'Yes' said Elizabeth. 'I think that would help. I'd like to explain some of the things I do, and I'd like to be clearer on what's going to change.'

This conversation is the first step in the process of getting Elizabeth on board. She is a key member of the team. Making the effort to clarify expectations with her and to ensure her commitment from the start is time well spent.

### **Example of how to obtain commitment when you don't have authority**

Sometimes you don't have the power and authority to hold someone to account and you have to depend on your personal influencing skills to obtain their commitment and cooperation, as happens if you are in a project team or in a service department.

When you don't have authority to make things happen it is easy to become impatient and frustrated at the lack of action. But if you overstep the authority of your role you might be considered pushy or even aggressive, and you could be at risk of stalling your career.

When you need the cooperation of a colleague or senior person you have to balance respectfulness with assertiveness. You also have to distinguish between obtaining commitment and enforcing compliance.

In the conversation that follows, Anita confronts Joe, a manager over whom she has no authority but from whom she needs cooperation.

*Anita was on her way to a meeting with Joe, one of her line managers. She needed information from him for a project report that was due by the end of the month. She had requested his input several times, but all she got from him were some promises he had not kept and some evasive answers he had given her in a phone call the previous day.*

*As she climbed the stairs to his office, she saw her face in a mirror. She had not realised she was looking so grim and determined. 'Whoops!' she said to herself, as she took a deep breath and tried to relax her shoulders. She smiled as she knocked on Joe's door. 'Hi Joe, thanks for seeing me. I know you're busy – I won't take long.'*

*Joe dragged his attention away from his computer screen. 'I know what you're here for. Look, I don't think you realise the pressure we're under at the moment. We had the big shut-down last month and now there's some talk of strike action.'*

*'Joe, I do understand there've been problems recently and I'm not here to make life more difficult for you. We did agree that the data from the project would be of use to your people. It's time well spent. I asked to see you today because when I called you yesterday and asked you to commit to a date when I could get the data from you, you gave me an answer that sounded, well, if I can be honest with you, evasive.'*

*'I'm getting quite frustrated. You agreed to the project on the basis that you could use its findings. It will be the first project that I've handled from beginning to end, so it's important for me, too.'*

*Joe sighed. 'Yeah, I guess you're right. I haven't made this a priority, what with everything else that's going on right now. Okay, I'll try and get it to you by the end of the week.'*

*Anita thought for a moment and then said firmly, 'Joe, this sounds like the promises you've made before. I realise I'm pushing you, but how do I know that this time I'll get the information?' She smiled apologetically to soften her words. 'Is there any way we can make this time different?'*

*Joe looked at her and narrowed his eyes. 'You can be insistent, can't you?' Then he sighed. 'Okay, tell you what. I think Tom, the team leader, can probably give you most of what you need. Talk to him first – he's in his office today – and then come back to me and we'll finalise it.'*

*'That sounds good. Thank you.'* Anita smiled. *'I'll stop by Tom's office on my way out.'* She paused, looked him in the eye and asked, *'Do you have a time I can see you this afternoon to follow up with you?'*

You can set the tone for a conversation inadvertently, by the way you request it, by the venue you choose and in the nonverbal signals you send, even before you even speak. Anita is wise to check her nonverbal signals before she enters Joe's office. She then opens the conversation by being empathetic about the pressure that Joe is under.

She describes the events that have led up to this conversation very specifically before she says that Joe's previous answer to her sounded evasive. You wouldn't lightly describe a senior manager's behaviour as evasive to his face, so Anita softens her comment with the phrase 'if I can be honest with you', and then is open about her frustration so that Joe can appreciate why she is behaving so assertively.

She points out that the project is important for both of them, not just for her, to remind Joe of the commitment he has made to it.

It's very easy to get caught up in a series of endless promises that people have no intention of keeping. Notice the skill that Anita uses when she says: 'Is there any way we can make this time different?'

At the end of the conversation she makes sure that she will be able to follow up on it and hold Joe to account by asking him to commit to a time when they can talk again.

The extent to which you can hold someone to account depends on your relationship with him or her, your relative power and authority, and your own skill and confidence. When you're dealing with an employee you can be fairly direct but if you are talking with someone who is at your own level or senior to you, it's always wise to start out slowly and to feel your way gently through the conversation.