

EVALUATING COACHING AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

A critical component of coaching is feedback, yet not all managers conduct sessions designed to provide insight into performance strengths and weaknesses well. Although some managers experience problems in the actual delivery, the causes of strong feedback sessions are rooted in activities that take place long before the actual conversation—things like ensuring performance expectations are clear or building strong relationships with employees.

This guide is designed to assist managers with the delivery of formal (i.e., HR sanctioned) feedback as effectiveness at this activity can have a profound impact on employee performance. Yet, the framework used in formal feedback conversations can also be applied to informal feedback that occurs between employee performance reviews. Additionally, this guide provides insight into assessing your employee's development progress to ensure that your coaching efforts remain focused on the most critical development areas with the aim of reaching realistic goals.

This guide is divided into two sections:

Section I: Providing Feedback

Section II: Assessing Development Progress

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SECTION I: PROVIDING FEEDBACK

OVERVIEW

1 Provide Ongoing, Informal Feedback Between Formal Reviews

Managers and employees expect that there will be formal feedback delivered during the performance review process. However, managers that only rely on these semi-annual or annual opportunities to give performance feedback run the risk of having tense discussions if direct reports hear content that surprises them. Managers should make a point of providing their employees with informal feedback (i.e., feedback not tied to the performance review process) on an ongoing basis. Not only will this improve the quality of formal performance reviews, it will encourage employees to continue positive or correct negative performance and behaviors as they occur.

2 Time Feedback to When It Will Deliver the Greatest Benefit to Your Direct Reports

To ensure they are providing their direct reports with measured, appropriate feedback, managers often put off discussions until they feel they have adequate time to dedicate to them. Unfortunately, this makes it harder for direct reports to connect feedback to the behaviors that triggered it. It is critical that managers provide informal feedback when it is of most value to employees (i.e., in the moment) as opposed to when it works best for the manager.

3 Feedback on Performance Strengths—“Good Job” Is Not Good Feedback

Managers enjoy giving their direct reports positive feedback. But not all managers do it well. Simply pointing out that someone has done a “good job” is a reward—not a learning tool. By making the link between good performance and its contribution to the team or organization’s goals, you increase the chances you will see this type of performance in the future.



To help prepare for feedback discussions, view the “Tips for Preparing for the Performance Review” on page 5 and the “Performance Review Checklist” on page 6.

4 Tread Carefully When Providing Feedback on Performance Weaknesses

The discussion of performance weaknesses is often the most dreaded part of a performance review. And with good reason: managers who stumble in this part of a review can negatively impact their direct reports’ future performance. However, managers who can effectively deliver this type of feedback can positively impact employee performance. If you have to deliver these types of messages, be prepared to do it well.



For help in providing this type of feedback, see “Tips for Delivering Feedback on Performance Weaknesses” on page 7.

5 Walk the Talk—Encourage Your Team to Provide You with Feedback

Everyone needs feedback to understand how they’re doing. By encouraging your team to provide you with constructive feedback, you’re building a culture that encourages development and coaching.



Direct reports often have difficulty providing feedback to their managers; provide your teams with copies of “Upward Feedback Tips” on page 8 to help guide them through the process.

TIPS FOR PREPARING FOR THE PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Although effectively delivered feedback during formal performance reviews can have a positive impact on your employees' performance, managers often struggle to deliver these messages well—particularly when the feedback includes a discussion of weaknesses. By no means exhaustive, these five tips provide guidance as you prepare for these conversations.

Five Performance Review Tips

- 1. Clearly Explain Performance Expectations at the Beginning of the Review Cycle**—You are more likely to have a tense discussion if your employees feel they are being evaluated unfairly; make sure everyone is on the same page with regards to expectations at the beginning of the review cycle.
- 2. Be Prepared**—Walking into the review “cold” can lead to miscommunication and confusion; make sure you have at least thought about the themes you wish to discuss ahead of time.
- 3. Provide Concrete Examples**—Make sure you can support the observations in your evaluation with evidence.
- 4. Tread Carefully When Providing Feedback on Performance Weaknesses**—How you deliver this type of feedback can improve or damage your employee's performance (see page 7 for tips on delivering this type of feedback). Make sure your feedback here focuses on only one or two areas, and that the discussion of these areas does not dominate the review.
- 5. NEVER Provide Feedback on Personality Weaknesses**—While there is a benefit to providing feedback on personality strengths, there is nothing to be gained from providing feedback on personality weaknesses. Focus any constructive criticism on performance only.

PERFORMANCE REVIEW CHECKLIST

To provide greater guidance for performance reviews or in some cases, more informal feedback discussions, we've included the checklist below. This list is designed to serve as a starting point as you seek to lead a constructive and productive discussion of your direct report's performance and any follow up steps.

List of Preparation Steps

Activity	Completed?
1. Have I required that my direct reports provide me with a self review so I can identify and plan for areas of possible disagreement during the review?	
2. Have I requested feedback for my direct reports from other sources (e.g., peers, internal customers) to ensure I have a complete picture of their performance?	
3. Have I identified performance strengths and examples that demonstrate these strengths?	
4. Have I pinpointed the one or two areas of performance weakness that I will address in this review?	
5. Have I identified concrete examples that demonstrate the impact of these performance weaknesses?	
6. Have I identified possible action steps that the employee and I can take to help close any development gaps?	
7. Have I created an outline of talking points where the bulk of the review is on strengths, and any weaknesses are put into context?	
8. Have I ensured that I have a plan for next steps (e.g., timeline for creating a development plan)?	
9. Have I clearly identified performance expectations for the next review cycle or set up a time to discuss them in the near future?	

TIPS FOR PROVIDING FEEDBACK ON PERFORMANCE WEAKNESSES

Most managers experience some degree of anxiety when delivering feedback on performance weaknesses. While it can be a sensitive topic in informal sessions, poor performance can be a more difficult discussion during a formal performance review due to implications on compensation and record keeping. While the tips below are good rules to follow regardless of the forum, they tend to take on more meaning during the formal review process.

Before the Review: Create a Platform for a Constructive Discussion

1. **Work on Your Employee Relationships**—Employees will not receive constructive criticism well if they feel the foundation of your evaluation is rooted in personality differences. While you do not need to be your employee's "friend," you should work to create the perception that you are fair and reasonable. The healthier the relationship, the easier it is to deliver this type of feedback.
2. **Clearly Explain Performance Expectations**—There is nothing more frustrating for an employee than to spend an entire review cycle working towards goals that turn out not to matter. Make sure you and your employee are on the same page as to the type of behaviors, activities, or skills that demonstrate expected performance.
3. **Provide Informal Feedback Between Reviews**—It is important to try to address undesirable behavior or performance problems as they arise. This increases the chances that you can improve performance sooner. It also ensures that your employee does not hear about a development area for the first time in the review, which can be months after the problem first arose.
4. **Collect Concrete Examples**—It will be easier to provide this type of feedback if you can cite specific examples where the behavior or lack of skill had a negative impact on a task, project, or assignment. Additionally, you can use these examples to point to any improvements you witnessed across the review cycle, allowing you to cast the development area in a more positive light.

During the Review: Ensure Messages Are Received

5. **Start with and Focus on the Good News**—Everyone likes to be told they're doing well. Providing examples of how performance helped the business is critical as it sets the stage for using examples when you discuss performance problems or development areas later. Additionally, you're letting your employees know that you value the contributions they make to the business and mitigating against any feelings of "my boss is out to get me" when the discussion moves to development areas.
6. **Avoid Making Judgments**—Avoid words like "poor performance" or "weakness"; instead, present these issues in the context of developmental opportunities. Indeed, by tying this feedback to the impact performance has on specific business objectives, you increase the chances your review will be perceived as fair.
7. **Don't Just Talk, Listen**—It's not unnatural for people to be defensive or feel the need to make excuses for their poor performance. You can help prevent these instances from becoming confrontational by listening to their counterpoints. Sometimes the excuses are valid, others not. In either case, you can use this part of the discussion as the groundwork for building a plan together for closing this performance gap.
8. **Prepare for Negative Reactions**—Regardless of your planning and preparation, there is always a chance your employee will react negatively. In those situations, it is critical to listen to their points, appear calm, and to make sure you present an unbiased view of the development area. Once your point has been made, you can attempt to develop a plan for addressing the performance problem then, or you can wait until the employee appears more receptive to your perspective.
9. **Summarize the Conversation and Provide Next Steps**—Begin to develop a plan for addressing the performance weakness and provide an overview of how you plan to support your employee through this process. You may also take this opportunity to discuss your expectations for the next review cycle. Even if the conversation has been tense, make sure you provide a summary that includes performance strengths.

After the Review: Follow Through on Your Commitments

10. **Lay the Groundwork for the Next Review**—By following through on your commitments, you not only guarantee that you provide informal feedback across the review cycle, but you also build trust with your employee, which helps ensure the next review you deliver will be successful.

TIPS FOR DELIVERING FEEDBACK TO YOUR MANAGER

Managers, like their employees, have strengths and areas where they can improve. It is often difficult to understand the impact either of these has on the team without feedback. Yet many employees feel uncomfortable delivering feedback to their direct managers, especially if any of that feedback can be construed as negative. The following five tips are designed to help guide you through these sometimes delicate conversations as you provide your manager with the guidance he or she needs to help you and the team succeed.

① **Focus on What Is Already Working, Not Just What Needs to Be Improved**

Managers not only need to know where they can improve, they also need to understand what they do well. By engaging in a discussion that focuses on what's working while addressing one or two areas for improvement, you can leave your manager feeling that your feedback has been fair as opposed to overly critical.

② **Know Your Boundaries**

Your manager was promoted to his or her role for demonstrating the skills required to succeed in that role. For this reason, your feedback should focus more on your manager's relationship with the team or work assignments (which you are qualified to discuss) as opposed to criticizing the team's strategic direction or long-term planning (which may be best addressed by your manager's manager). Only raise these issues if you (a) have very serious concerns and (b) are ready to propose actionable solutions.

③ **Be Non-Judgmental**

While it can be difficult to provide unbiased assessments of your manager's performance, you can go a long way towards creating the impression of a lack of bias by making your presentation as unemotional as possible. Don't focus on emotion, focus on facts.

④ **Give Concrete Examples**

In order to provide context for your points, provide examples that support your feedback. For example, rather than saying "you have had great ideas," note how a particular idea saved the team time, money, etc. The use of facts will give your feedback greater weight.

⑤ **Focus on the Future, Not on the Past**

Your manager will probably make some mistakes along the way. Focusing on these mistakes, however, is not productive, as the past cannot be changed. It is more important to offer ideas and strategies that can make your team stronger in the future.



SECTION II: ASSESSING DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

TIPS FOR ASSESSING DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS

Often, managers and employees create formal or informal development plans, only to have those plans take a backseat to the work on their desks, resurfacing during the next review. It's important to treat the assessment of development progress as you treat development: as an ongoing process. To that extent, you should have periodic check-ins with your direct report to see if the development areas, goals, milestones, or timelines need any adjustment. The tips below can help ensure that you maximize your return on your coaching investment.

① **Schedule Time to Specifically Discuss Development Progress**

Encourage your employee to schedule regular meetings to discuss development progress as is necessary.



To help your employee prepare for these meetings, you can provide a copy of the tip sheet "Assessing My Progress Against My Development Plan" on page 11.

② **Review the Plan Before You Meet with Your Employee**

Make sure you are prepared for these meetings. Review the plan, and if you feel the need to make adjustments, have concrete examples of behaviors that bolster your argument. By walking into the meeting with a plan of action, you not only ensure your time will be spent wisely, but you communicate that your direct report's development is important to you.

③ **Ensure the Development Areas Are Still Areas of Focus**

Has a new development area arisen that merits your immediate attention? Has your employee achieved development objectives or closed any gaps? Has your employee taken on new responsibilities that shift the focus of the development plan? Make sure these questions are discussed and the development plan as originally written still balances areas that will boost current and future performance.

④ **Evaluate Your Coaching Efforts**

Take the time to review either your coaching plan or your direct report's development plan to see if your coaching commitments are still on target. Keep in mind that it may be necessary to shift the focus of your coaching efforts if your direct report's development areas change.

⑤ **Adjust Milestones, Goals, and Timelines as Needed**

Unforeseen circumstances can impact any aspect of the development plan. At the close of the conversation, make sure that all milestones, goals, and timelines are realistic.

ASSESSING MY PROGRESS AGAINST MY DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Many times employees work with their managers to create development plans and then put them on the back burner until the next formal performance review. But by regularly checking in with your manager, you can gain a better understanding of how you're progressing and how your manager perceives your progress before you formally meet to rewrite your development plan. The following tips are provided to help ensure that your development plans are relevant and reflect the skills and capabilities you want or need to build.

① **Set up Meetings with Your Manager**

At the end of the day, it's *your* development and *your* career. You are responsible for proactively ensuring that your development is in line with your own performance expectations or career aspirations.

② **Take the Time to Review Your Plan Before You Meet with Your Manager**—As you examine your development plan, ask yourself the following questions:

- a. Do I have to set new goals or milestones because I reached the old ones?
- b. Are my milestones or goals still achievable, or do I need to readjust the timeline?
- c. Have I had any changes in my projects or job responsibilities that make any of my development areas irrelevant?
- d. Have new strengths or development opportunities come to light that would serve as better areas of focus for our efforts?
- e. Can I provide my manager with concrete examples as I make the case for amending my development plan?

③ **Send Your Manager Any Major Changes in Advance**—Don't surprise your manager with major changes during the meeting. Give him or her the opportunity to review your proposals. It could be that you are in complete agreement, or it could be that your manager perceives your progress differently. Either way, advance warning provides for a more constructive discussion about your development.

④ **Leave the Meeting with a Balanced Plan**—Make sure you leave all meetings with a firm belief that your plan balances current performance expectations with future career aspirations and challenges you to build on your strengths and development areas.

⑤ **Review Where Your Manager Can Provide the Most Help**—Take the time to review your manager's coaching efforts to date, and see if they have aligned with your development areas. If you wish to make changes to your development plan, you should be prepared to discuss how your manager can best help you achieve any new goals or milestones.

Note to Members

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