



BY DAVID COHEN  
For Workplace News

## Performance reviews that go nowhere

I was working up a sweat on the treadmill at the gym when I suddenly realized it's that time of year again. Time for managers and employees to stop working on achieving business objectives and start dreading performance reviews.

How did I know? Well, on the stationary bike to my left, an executive was complaining on her cell phone about the "waste of time reviews" she had to write; while on the Stairmaster to my right, an employee was moaning on his cell phone about the "meaningless ritual" that was to come. Here's what they both had to say.

EMPLOYEE: He told me to fill it out in advance myself so we could have a meaningful discussion. Can you believe it's my responsibility to complete my own review? Wonder why? Is my manager really interested in what I think or is he just plain lazy?

BOSS: Who's got time to think about each individual in a vacuum? In the end I do it the way my own bosses did their reviews — I take my best employee and use his score as the standard for everyone else.

EMPLOYEE: It's not like my manager is really involved in my work anyway. So how can I expect him to be accurate and fair in judging my performance? All he

can really be objective about is my results. But are the results my fault?

BOSS: They should call it "excuse management" not "performance management." We end up sitting across the table from each other talking about the reasons why they didn't achieve their objectives. The blame always lies elsewhere.

EMPLOYEE: Everyone knows you have to negotiate your way to a good review. If your manager always underestimates your capabilities, you need to inflate your scores a little to ensure a good compromise.

BOSS: One of my reports is a lousy team player and I know that hurts us, but his numbers are good so he gets his bonus. Then there's Jim. I rely on him too much at crunch time and he gets punished with extra work. But he'll always say yes and we couldn't get by without him. How do you score that?

EMPLOYEE: Here's what I wish my boss would say: Since I've already decided on your raise and bonus please fill this form out in such a way that it matches those conclusions. Then we'll both get back to work.

BOSS: I should just be honest about it and say to them, figure out what trendy workshops or skill-building courses you want to take and check them off. I'll fill in the blanks to assign those as your new areas of improvement. Then we can both get back to work.

Stop! I smacked the stop button on my treadmill and got off. It was time to hit the showers.

What's the point of performance reviews in the first place? Just to fill out one more form and jump through the annual bonus and raise hoop?

If they only exist to measure the results of the last 12 months, they should be done away with— that's like being stuck on a treadmill. If, however, they can be used to focus on making needed improvements for the future and establishing a link between behaviour on the job and the achievement of specific business objectives, maybe, just maybe, they can provide some important forward momentum — and everyone involved will think they are worth doing.

To turn performance management programs into performance improvement programs, managers need to learn how to identify, evaluate and teach those on-the-job behaviours that sustain corporate culture and contribute to business objectives.

Here are some points that can facilitate that end:

Set consistent expectations and tell your report the truth about what they need to do to be successful.

Explain the organization's vision and strategic plan and have a dialogue about how the individual can contribute to that meaningfully.

Provide feedback on a continuous basis, not just on negative

occasions. Don't assume they know what you're thinking.

Measure progress at frequent intervals (not just at the end of the year) to ensure that people are on track or have reasonable time to readjust.

Expect from your employees only those behaviours that you, yourself, also demonstrate.

Thank your people for their efforts in a heartfelt way, not because some performance management course says you should.

Performance reviews don't have to be an empty ritual. They can be an opportunity for honest reflection, insight and a commitment to grow. Without them, your employees would probably feel like they were stuck on a treadmill in their jobs unaware of what they need to do to make a difference. Figure that out together and then you'll have something to really talk about. ■

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