

“Get Rid of the Performance Review”

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Don't get me wrong: Reviewing performance is good; it should happen every day. But employees need evaluations they can believe, not the fraudulent ones they receive. They need evaluations that are dictated by need, not a date on the calendar. They need evaluations that make them strive to improve, not pretend they are perfect. Most managers don't really have a clue what holding somebody accountable means. Managers fail to realize the most essential tool they have in getting quality performances is a trusting relationship with the people who work for them. It's really that simple.

But while hierarchy is essential for clarifying jurisdictions and responsibilities, it is entirely dysfunctional in a relationship and the development of that all too crucial factor of trust. The one-sided, boss-dominated performance review can be replaced by a straight-talking relationship where the focus is on results, not personality. Getting rid of the performance review is a big step forward in allowing a boss and the boss's direct reports to communicate candidly about what's needed for better results on the job.

If teamwork, esprit de corps, and open, trusting, straight-talk relationships are your criteria, it's hard to find a single positive that comes out of performance reviews. Mainstream management is embedded in, and relies on, a culture of domination—and the performance review is the biggest hammer management has. We are creatures of habit, even when those habits are bad for us.

No serious person, especially one responsible for getting the company the greatest degree of excellence possible, would want to wait a year, or even a week, to discuss a problem or a performance-enhancing opportunity that could have an immediate payoff. If there's a problem, put a stop to it now. If there's a performance-enhancing opportunity, milk it for all you can get. Give the company every advantage possible. Don't put improvement off for up to a year.

I believe discussing performance should be an option available at all times, dictated by circumstance, opportunity, need, and (most important) relationship. I find it illogical to assume that any person's assessment of another person is independent of that evaluator's motives in the moment.

What's it going to take for people to internalize that each critique is as much an expression of the evaluator's self-interests as it is a performer's attribute or imperfection? That's why the typical performance review—indeed, the typical workplace interaction between boss and subordinate—is so bogus. There's only one opinion that counts—the boss's. It's all about the subordinate telling the boss what the boss wants to hear, instead of speaking one's mind about what the subordinate believes is best for the company.

Managers first need to learn the logic and inner reasons for why an employee thinks and acts as he or she does, and then enter that framework when giving guidance. In performance reviews, a manager's interpretation of an employee's behavior is all that counts. No questions asked.

There is too much going on to suggest that pay is simply about merit and performance. It's about interpersonal politics and loyalty, about what's important at any particular moment to any particular boss, about the department's budget. It's about ninety different variables—none of which any two bosses will see exactly the same way. The performance review is only slightly about the performer. It's mainly about everybody else. Why not just deploy people appropriately to their skills and stay on the lookout for growth that compensates so that they can now accomplish what formerly they could not?

If you want to know what you just said, you better ask the guy what he heard. If many workers today seem to want to come in and just pick up their paycheck, perhaps the problem isn't the workers. Perhaps it's because the workplace has made it impossible for them to do anything else.

If four different people tell me that I need to change four different things to get ahead, I'm not going to change anything. It wouldn't be worth it. And if the employee doesn't think it's worth it, by definition the feedback becomes useless. It's just so many empty words. We use the many positives we have to get done what we get done. But the performance review ignores this. It penalizes humans for being human. It systematically forces bosses to fill out these reviews with a bias toward finding supposed faults and areas that need improvement, rather than applauding subordinates for the positives that are actually accomplishing so much—and could perhaps be used to accomplish even more.

If I have to hide my true self, I'll never get any better at anything. And I'll never feel as if my accomplishments are appreciated. I'll just know where I'm supposedly lacking. You can't understand what someone else is doing until you know the mind-set that person is using and learn the grounds for their attachment to it.

After waiting a few days, drop by the recipient's office for an informal visit to casually inquire, "How are things going? What's on your mind? What's your number one priority? What's your current thinking, and when do you think you can get to the project?" And so on. Only after you know what was omitted, misinterpreted, and differently prioritized will you know what you actually need to do to get the results you want.

Nine principles that bosses need to understand if they are going to effect a change in a subordinate.

1. Make subordinates see that you understand their perspective
2. Show subordinates that change is important for the company
3. Be willing to make exceptions to the rules

4. Show subordinates how their making a change can make a difference for their own future
5. Consider your subordinates' entire lives, understanding that doing well at work takes a backseat to doing well in life more generally
6. Be specific, don't be universal
7. Avoid comparisons
8. Use I-Speak
9. For Your Eyes Only

Questions that an employee can ask their boss:

1. What do you see as my best attributes and strong suits in my working with and leading people? Where possible, give an example of where you have seen what you identify in my actions and what you've seen result from my using or expressing the attributes you describe.
2. Thinking about my career ahead and my working with and even leading others, what do you see as a quality or two that I should attempt to strengthen? Please give an example of something you saw, heard about, or personally experienced that illustrates why you believe I will benefit from some enhancements here.
3. What types of people and/or situations do you think I'll have the easiest time working with and leading?
4. What situations do you see posing the greatest challenge to my effectiveness as a leader?
5. Is there any additional feedback you can provide that you think will be beneficial to me? Don't hold back with your speculations; count on me to forget what I don't think applies. The most relevant metric in my considering what you have said is that you are trying to help me. Once again, thank you for the counsel and candor implied.

In a straight-talk relationship, both boss and subordinate have the opportunity to learn. Subordinates learn what they need to do differently to achieve desired results, and bosses learn what type of oversight, support, and guidance the subordinate needed but did not receive. Then both can look forward to what must be done in the future to achieve a better outcome.

Understand, too, that the problem isn't the amount of feedback people receive. Everybody receives more than they could ever use. The issue is whether any of that feedback is processed and learned from, and if it is used to improve boss/subordinate teamwork for the company's gain.

The goal should be to create an environment in which all parties feel safe enough to be honest with one another and do everything they can to accomplish the primary goal of improving company results and providing a supportive environment for people to self-reflect and grow. We need a dialogue, not a monologue.

In reviews, the question is always “How are you doing in pleasing me?”

In previews, it’s “How are we doing together in getting the company what it needs?”

In reviews, it’s “How can you do better?”

In previews, it’s “How can we do better?”

Performance reviews are about how one worker compares to another.

Performance previews are about two individuals combining forces.

Freed of the performance review, bosses can let different people find their own unique ways of accomplishing what needs to be done. They only need evaluate the results and how they compare to what was pledged against company goals. If it works, proves useful, is team-worthy and ethical, stay out of the subordinates’ way. If a subordinate gets results, who cares if her desk is messy?

Personal effectiveness depends on individuals making the best of their repertoire of imperfect skills. Why would you, with your unique imperfections, be expected to pursue a task exactly as I, with my imperfections, would? I’ll answer that one for you: You shouldn’t.

This is our system today, the performance review system. It is not geared toward getting the desired results. It’s geared toward not rocking the boat.

If nobody trusts anybody else, if nobody talks straight, if everybody is compared to everybody else, then everybody is left a prisoner to their fears and imagination. It becomes all about sucking up to avoid getting hammered in the performance review rather than telling the truth to advance the company’s cause.

Both manager and subordinate must understand why the other person does what he or she does. Only when you probe beneath the surface to understand intent do the actions other people take truly begin to make sense. And only after they make sense can you honestly work together as friends to give the company what it demands.

The point is that you don’t know what anything means to someone else until you inquire.

1. What are you getting from me that you like and find helpful?
2. What are you getting from me (and/or the system) that impedes your effectiveness and would like to have stopped?
3. What are you not getting from me (and/or the system) that you think would enhance your effectiveness, and tell me, specific to you, why do you need it at this time?

Of course it takes time. Why wouldn't it? Establishing a relationship, establishing trust, communicating with another person can't be done with a passing nod. But Bosses and subordinates also need a format to monitor the career progress of the subordinates, to make sure they are both on the same page in terms of understanding where the subordinate wants to go and what he or she needs to get there.

The performance review, with its hidden agendas and lack of straight talk and active questioning, makes that open career conversation nearly impossible. The preview mind-set changes that. For example, consider this

The problem that is inherent in any boss/subordinate relationship: that any communication between the two will involve one person being aware of his power and the other person being reluctant to express his opinion due to the fear of that power. Chain of command is one thing. Managing by intimidation is another. If bosses can create conditions where subordinates don't fear negative consequences for saying something the bosses find displeasing, then the dynamic will change. We're simply talking about treating people with respect and friendliness, with openness and empathy. We're talking about treating people the way we all want to be treated.

The most important distinction is that with reviews, the focus is on the employee's individual performance after the fact. How many widgets you sold, how many audits you performed, how many cases you handled. But too often, as I showed in the widget salesman example, the bigger picture gets lost in the shuffle. With previews, the eye is on the prize: the desired corporate results. It's then up to the boss/subordinate team to figure out the best way to get there. Do you follow what I'm saying? With reviews, this engineer would have been marked down as deficient, because he wasn't producing the agreed-upon output. But with previews, the focus is on the best way to get what the company needs, playing to each individual's strengths. Performance reviews typically come up with a measure against which employees are evaluated. In contrast, previews come up with a measure against which results, not employees, are measured.

The performance review doesn't force people to have a conversation. It forces the boss to give a monologue, with the pretense of seeking a conversation. The preview, by contrast, truly does force people to have a reason for frequent, direct, and candid conversations about topics that clearly matter. Bosses fire people all the time, and it's based on one thing—the boss says the subordinate hasn't performed.

Why isn't the big boss saying, "The boss hasn't succeeded in getting the subordinate to perform"? That's where the real skin in the game should be—and it isn't.

Here are key differences between performance **reviews** and performance **previews**:

1. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS FOCUS ON FINDING FAULTS AND PLACING BLAME. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS FOCUS ON ACHIEVING RESULTS.
2. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS FOCUS ON DEVIATIONS FROM SOME IDEAL AS WEAKNESSES. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES.

3. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS ARE ABOUT COMPARING EMPLOYEES. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS TREAT PEOPLE AS INDIVIDUALS.
4. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS CREATE A COMPETITION BETWEEN BOSS AND SUBORDINATE. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS CREATE A TEAM WHERE BOTH TEAMMATES INFORM AND LEARN FROM EACH OTHER.
5. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS ARE ONE-SIDE-ACCOUNTABLE AND BOSS-DOMINATED MONOLOGUES. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS ARE TWO-SIDED CONVERSATIONS, WITH BOTH SIDES ACCOUNTABLE.
6. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS ARE THUNDERBOLTS FROM ON HIGH, WITH THE BOSS SPEAKING FOR THE COMPANY. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS ARE ONE PERSON'S OPINION.
7. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS MEAN THAT IF THE SUBORDINATE SCREWS UP, THE SUBORDINATE SUFFERS. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS PUT BOTH THE SUBORDINATE'S AND BOSS'S SKIN IN THE GAME.
8. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS ALLOW THE BIG BOSS TO GO ON AUTOPILOT. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS FORCE THE BIG BOSS TO BECOME INVOLVED.
9. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS GIVE HR PEOPLE TOO MUCH POWER. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS PUT HR PEOPLE IN THEIR APPROPRIATE, SUPPORTING ROLE.
10. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS LEAD TO BULLSHIT. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS LEAD TO STRAIGHT TALK.
11. PERFORMANCE REVIEWS ARE HATED, AND MANAGERS AND SUBORDINATES AVOID DOING THEM UNTIL THEY ARE FORCED TO. PERFORMANCE PREVIEWS CAN BE AFFIRMING AND WELCOMED BY EMPLOYEES.