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Adopting a Development Approach

Law Department Management



What is the point of the evaluation process? What specifically are you trying to achieve? If you cannot answer these questions and arguably a dozen others along the same lines, you are wasting time — yours and your employees' — by going through the motions of completing the form and dragging them into a meeting to discuss its contents.

So assuming you want to get something out of the evaluation process other than checking an item off your to-do list, how do you go about it? Common advice is to sit down one-on-one, start with the positive, move on to the negatives, and then end on a positive note. But an effective review demands so much more than sandwiching the areas for improvement between some positives.

The best reviews start long before the review and include the development of clearly articulated goals and expectations as the foundation upon which your evaluations will be based. Without this foundation, how will you know what you are measuring your employees against, other than a subjective notion of their job? Development approaches are circular rather than linear and allow for input, feedback, and buy-in from employees; they provide a solid foundation upon which employees can grow and thrive.

Below are some questions that will help you and your employees create a better evaluation process.

How can I create a safe and open environment for communication? As is much of what will follow, you cannot conduct meaningful evaluations in 10 minutes or under the duress of getting this item off your to-do list by the end of the year. It is better to take the time to think about your staff individually and their place on your team and give them the time and space during your one-on-one to interact with you in a way that works for them. Anything short of that and you send the message that this process is not important; and once you've done that, it is difficult to get them to care about

what you say.

What can I do to make the process an ongoing dialogue, not a soliloquy? No one wants to be lectured, so you are likely to find your interactions more engaging if you have a dialogue with your employees rather than telling them what you want, how to do it, and what you thought of how they did. By basing metrics to be evaluated on mutually agreed expectations that are communicated at the time of development and continuously reiterated and supported throughout the review period, you'll have a better chance of getting the outcome desired.

How can I make the periodic review a summary of discussions/overview of events that I have communicated throughout the review period? Nothing that is brought up during the one-on-one should be something that your employees haven't heard before, whether it's kudos for a job well done, or identification of areas for improvement. Taking time throughout the year to acknowledge and appreciate the highlights and lowlights of your employees' performances goes a long way toward building relationships and credibility.

How can I make some of the appraisal and outcome about me? As the boss, you bear some of the responsibility for the performance of those you lead. It is not acceptable to have staff who are underperforming and not working toward improvement. To move them in that direction will require you to expend some of your time and attention on their development. Inquiring how you can be involved to help them with their development will send the message that you are not being an ogre by pointing out weaknesses, but that you are as invested in their growth as they are.

Why should I always be coaching? Evaluations are not a one and done proposition. As you go through each of the above steps, would it be advantageous to think about how you can communicate with questions that draw your employees into the process, that engage their creativity, and buy-in? When people have their own epiphanies about their growth and understand why those epiphanies came about, they are more likely to stick to the process even when it gets difficult.

If you are not comfortable approaching performance evaluations from this perspective, this could be an opportunity for you to work on your own development plan that will help you grow into a better leader.

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