

## The Empowering Performance Review: A Free Guide to Easier Reviews

In my experience as a human resource manager, both managers and employees alike often resist performance reviews. The traditional methods and caveats espoused for many years have served as an impediment to more productive possibilities. Work can and ought to be more fun and consequently more productive.

This is a free guideline to help managers with performance reviews. Over the past 30 years, I've been able to help managers make performance reviews easier for themselves and their employees. This has been accomplished through workshops and with individual managers. I want to pass along these tricks and tools to make performance reviews more welcome and less avoided. I believe that they will be helpful. (One manager, after finishing my workshop, commented that this pattern did for performance reviews what Novocain did for dentistry.)

There is a pattern for holding reviews that I've dubbed "Directed Listening." I will outline the "how to" steps in some detail, but before doing so, here are the principles on which directed listening is based and which make it work:

- Asking and listening are more powerful tools than telling.
- Most employees, when asked, can give an accurate assessment of their own performance. Only minor adjustments are needed.
- The great majority of employees perform well in most areas of their job with only a few areas needing improvement. Both managers and employees tend to agree on this point.
- Visualizing future successes in both strong and problematic areas, using a structured dialogue, is a very powerful motivating tool.

Managers can increase optimism for both themselves and their employees by using a process that consists of an inner and an outer part. The inner part deals with the structure and style of the questions. The outer part of the pattern is a strategy for when to raise certain topics or maximum ease and effect.

For managers—and particularly new managers—it is often helpful to think of performance reviews as a process of coaching rather than making judgments. Perhaps you can remember a time when you helped a teammate on a sports team improve some aspect of his or her game. You may have had a trick or two which first you demonstrated and later practiced with him or her. Under these circumstances both of you realized that any improvement created would benefit the team. You wanted your teammate to feel more successful and comfortable with the new ideas.

We will cover specific steps on how to create this environment. It's really very easy.

## Starting point: The strong performer

If you ask most managers how well most of their employees perform, they will tell you that the majority are really good employees with just one or two areas that need improvement. Fortunately, these are the employees for whom directed listening is best suited. I encourage you to think about one or two of these strong performers as you visualize going through the discussion pattern that I'm going to lay out for you. We will deal with the more difficult or low performance cases later on. (If you're learning to ski or snowboard you start on the bunny hill and not on a steep or expert run.)

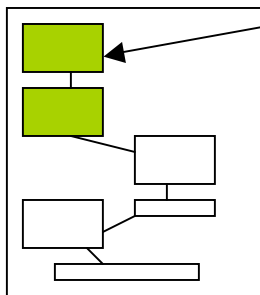
Most managers rate their employees' performance as 4's on a 1-5 scale.

## The Directed Listening format:

I've chosen the name *directed listening format* because it most accurately describes the two patterns, one within the other, that work best in these discussions. You may find it helpful to refer to the overview diagram entitled "Directed Listening Format" which appears at the end of this article, as you read through the following.

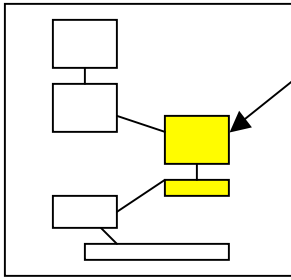
First is the **outer, or overall pattern**, the strategy for the whole discussion. Within that is the inner pattern, the techniques for listening and drawing out the employees' own ideas, judgments and skills.

Again, bring to mind one of your stronger employees. For the **outer pattern** it is helpful to think about four or five major performance areas in the employee's job that you wish to discuss. You will need to have in mind three areas in which this employee has been successful and one or two that need improvement. The first two successes will be used initially, and the third later on.



We start by **reviewing two successes**. (Notice the first two green blocks in the diagram.). Reviewing successes first is a key part of the process. By taking them apart, bringing out what has been learned and what skills have been applied, we catalogue these for future use. Also, by putting successes first we gain employees' confidence that they will be treated with respect and that the things they have done well have been noticed. There have been a number of surveys which indicate that having their achievements

confirmed is of the greatest concern to employees. By addressing this concern at the outset, you will render employees more willing to participate in extending their successes and brainstorming new ideas. You will be using the **past and present tense** to discuss these successes.



The next step in the pattern is to review **areas in which improvement is desired**. (Notice the second two yellow blocks in the diagram on the right side of the page.) Here we use the present and primarily the **future tense**. **Using the future tense for discussing improvements is the biggest end run in the whole process**. How this works will become quite apparent once you understand the inner pattern through the examples provided.

The next block, on the left, the third step in the discussion, is **another success**, the third success from the list you made earlier for which you return to using the past and present tense.

The final block in the process is the **summary and next steps**. Here you highlight all of the steps that have preceded and develop an agreement with the employee as to follow-up actions and plans. Think of a coach's post-game wrap up.

Keep these thoughts about the outer pattern in mind while we cover the inner pattern. After you understand each pattern, we will go through an example of how both are applied together.

**Time out option:** You might find it helpful to read through the first two success in the scripted example I've provided starting on page 5 and then come back to this point.

**The inner pattern:** In the full-sized diagram on the final page, I have indicated the inner pattern only by these few summary phrases:

**First and Second Successes:**

Non-judgmental opening:

"How's the \_\_\_\_\_ going?"

- follow-up
- follow-up
- follow-up
- wrap-up

Expand on this pattern. The following are some typical starter questions you might ask (You would adapt the phrasing to your situation and style.)

- "Lets talk about the \_\_\_ project" (Pick a successful project, objective or skill area.)
- "How do think that one has gone?" (Allow time for answer and withhold judgments.)
- "What were some of the obstacles you had to overcome?"

- “How did you deal with that?”
- “What skills or strengths do you think it took to get this done? (You will want to note these for later reference.)
- “How were you successful on this part?”
- “How do you rate yourself in this area?” (Optional question if you are doing ratings)

### **Areas for Improvement questions:**

#### **Similar pattern – different tense**

The significant shift here is that you use **present and future tense** in asking questions. Notice that as you start discussing areas for improvement, the employee’s state of mind is much more ready to move forward. The key areas of success have been acknowledged and the pattern for listening has been established.

This is the point in the discussion where the manager should have the most carefully crafted questions available. Your questions as a manager would obviously be created in the moment, and the following is only intended to provide you with seed ideas from which you can create much more suitable questions.

An example of a non-judgmental opening might be: "How do you feel \_\_\_\_\_ is going?"

You might be surprised to find how candid employees will now be in the context of the discussion.

Other follow-up questions might be:

- "What would you like to see happen here?"
- "What would make this seem easier for you?"
- “What help do you need from me to make this go better?"

The objective here is to enroll the employee in visualizing future successes. The dialoged examples will give you a better idea of what might actually occur in a live discussion. Also, with time and practice, you will be able to create or clone your own appropriate questions.

As you develop questions, it is also very helpful here to refer back to or recall a skill that the employee has demonstrated in the previously discussed successes and ask how that might be applied to this particular topic. Examples of prior successful characteristics might be such things as persistence, strong organizational skills, or asking for help when needed.



Manager: "Good morning, Pat. I'm glad we could get together and have a performance discussion. Thank you for asking Gerry to cover the phones so we won't be interrupted.

"Last time, one of the areas we had decided to work on was the development of a better filing system. What progress have you been able to make on that?"

Employee: "Initially, Chris, it was a problem of lack of space. We had room for only two more cabinets, so I wanted to consolidate and reorganize. Once I started through the process of developing new categories and moving the material to new files, it became obvious how many excess records we are keeping."

Manager: "What were some of the obstacles you had to overcome?"

Employee: "First, it was hard to decide what types of categories would be most useful to us. One of my friends who works at a major company in town, suggested drafting and circulating a list of file headings among the three of you to see if they would meet our needs. At the same time, I asked all of you to mark documents for retention time."

Manager: "You are able to get ideas from friends?"

Employee: "Yes, this one works in a records management department."

Manager: "That's excellent. I hope you will stay in touch. How did everything work from your point of view?"

The manager wanted to recognize the initiative specifically, and then steer back to the main thrust of the discussion.

Employee: "Of course, you saw the list and gave me some good suggestions, and I had good cooperation from the others too. Most of you thought retention times couldn't easily be decided in advance. So instead, as you are also aware, I am trying out a rotating review system where once a quarter I will review a certain section of the alphabet, pull what I think can go, and give each of you a final opportunity to make sure you agree."

Manager: "What do you think of that approach so far?"

Employee: "It's fine."

Manager: "Can you be a little more specific?"

Employee: "I have only done about twenty-five percent of the files, but so far, I have been able to cut about one third of what we are storing. This should create enough room for the new work. "

The manager started with a question from the format and then used other follow-up questions that directed the employee toward clarifying and evaluating the result, as well as analyzing what contributed to the success.

Manager: "That sounds like great progress for our filing. I would like to move on and talk about your new computer. What progress are you making with it?"

Employee: "There were some problems in the beginning, but now it seems to be just fine."

Manager: "What was difficult at first?"

Employee: "I was afraid I would accidentally modify or delete existing files, so all my early steps were slow and overly cautious."

Manager: "How did you overcome that?"

Employee: "First I phoned our IT department, and they told me about an evening course that they provided. It was only two or three hours, and it sure helped my confidence. The rest seemed to happen just with practice."

Manager: "I heard you say that overall the new computer wasn't easy for you. What skills did it take to turn things around?"

Employee: "I had to find the determination and build confidence to solve the problems without help from the rest of you. Once I got past my first group of folders, I found out how easy it was. In fact I think the computer can be used to solve our filing problems in the future."

Manager: "So it was your determination and initiative, right?"

Employee: "Yes. I did more than I thought I could."

Manager: "And how do you feel now?"

Employee: "Great—very positive"

Manager: "You should. You deserve to."

Employee: "Thank you."

Notice that the manager was careful to ask for the employee's evaluation first. Asking for analysis and self-evaluation, and then providing confirmation, rewards not only the work, but the employee's ability at self-evaluation. It also has the effect of providing a natural close to the second block of reviewing successes. The pattern of an open informal problem-solving discussion has been well established.

In introducing the discussion of the area where improvement is needed, the manager should use the same, non-judgmental opening. You can picture how devastating it would be to open with, "Here is an area that needs improvement." The employee's defenses would go up immediately.

Manager: "We also talked about handling conflicting priorities from myself and the two other managers. How is that going?"

Employee: "Well, frankly, not as well as our other areas."

Manager: "In what ways?"

Employee: "It is difficult because... you each think your own projects are higher priority than the others. You don't seem to agree among the three of you, and it is hard for me to decide."

Manager: "I see. What would happen if you discussed timing conflicts when we give you new work?"

Employee: "Usually, when one of you puts the project on my desk, you seem so busy and focused that I am reluctant to interrupt you to ask whether or not the project can be postponed. At the time it seems a bit easier just to squeeze it in."

Manager: "And the result is...?"

Employee: "The result is that frequently I can't meet all of the deadlines, and sometimes Bill gets upset whenever it happens to be his projects that are postponed or bumped due to projects from others. Sometimes he gets frustrated and just walks off."

Manager: "When that happens, how do you feel?"

Employee: "Frustrated and worried that I've let him down."

Manager: "How might you prevent that from happening in the future?"

Employee: "I guess I need some way of letting each of you know when one of your projects has to be pushed back, or getting two of you to decide which should come first."

Manager: "What are some different ways of doing that?"

Employee: "I would like to get all three of you together and help me decide which projects must come first. This will have to be a cooperative decision."

Manager: "I understand. Do you have any ideas? You know what our schedules are like."

Employee: "Could I get you to call me in at the end of your departmental meetings on Monday mornings?"

Manager: "I think that is an excellent idea, well worth a try. I'm sure more pre-planning will solve a significant part of the problem. Help me understand what you might do differently when another rush project gets put on your desk even if we make this change?"

Employee: "What I think I need to do is to question priorities right away, rather than postponing the issue."

Manager: "I agree. You showed persistence and initiative working with the computer filing problems, and I know that they will help here too. What do you think?"

Employee: "If I have had a chance to review the priorities on Monday, I'll be less reluctant to challenge anyone on new items, and I'll have a better understanding of what is going on overall."

Manager: "Good"

The manager has pulled in a desirable attribute from a successful area and simply asked that an existing skill be extended. The manager has also successfully avoided the temptation to confirm the employee's low evaluation. To do so could have triggered defenses and hindered the productive problem-solving that has occurred. The manager has allowed the employee's concern to be the motivator and also has encouraged the employee to take both responsibility and personal credit for developing the solutions.

The manager now turns to another successful area. The manager switches back to using the past tense and again uses a non-judgmental opening.

Manager: "The other area I would like to discuss is what you have been able to do regarding handling of the phones?"

Employee: "As you know we had a lot of problems with too many interruptions during some parts of the day."

Manager: "When did this seem to be the most troublesome?"

Employee: "Primarily in the mornings, when my workload is the heaviest, and when I like to concentrate on doing my longest projects."

Manager: "How did you deal with that?"

Employee: "Gerry, in Accounting, and I have been sharing phone coverage for lunch. I asked her if she had the same interruption problem, and it turned out she did, but in the afternoons. That's when her load is the greatest and she feels she is at her best. So we agreed to exchange an hour of phone coverage: one hour in the morning for one in the afternoon."

Manager: "Is this helping the way you hoped?"

Employee: "Yes, I think she does a good job, and certainly helps me a lot. I just hope you feel the department calls are being handled well."

Manager: "I really do, and thank you for the effort. I appreciate your ideas."

### **Summary and Review:**

The manager now recaps all of the areas and focuses on the next steps for developing and implementing the ideas generated from this meeting.

### **Getting prepared /Getting Started:**

To get ready for one of these reviews, you might want to list the questions and the specific performance areas in the order you plan to discuss them. If, on this list, you have a success that demonstrates a skill you'd like the employee to expand in the area for improvement, arrange to discuss this success ahead of the improvement areas.

Sometimes managers feel that they will not know what to ask. The following should help overcome startup concerns. In the workshop experience, managers have often surprised themselves by how well they're able to generate appropriate questions in the moment. This was achieved during this following exercise/role-play: In pairs, managers were asked to learn as much about their partner's performance using **only** a prescribed list of open-ended questions. (See list

below) They were asked to notice, and jot down, any questions they wanted to ask but were not on the list.

Many were surprised how much they learned about their partner's performance with this **very small** list of questions. Regarding the alternative questions they were prohibited from asking, most turned out to be minor variations of those on the list.

If you would like to try this exercise out, here are the questions used in the workshop:

**Starter question:** "What do you think is your most important recent accomplishment?"

**Follow-up open-ended questions:** (use in any order or number of times)

- "How so?"
- "Can you tell me a little bit more about that?"
- "How do you feel about that?"
- "What do you think should be done?"
- "Why?"
- "Would you tell me about another accomplishment?"
- "What problems did you experience?"

This list is very helpful when starting the whole performance review process from scratch.

**Article summary:**

As with any recipe, the proof is in the results. Be patient, your second batch will be better than your first. For those of you who have struggled with or avoided doing performance reviews, this is intended to give you ease and provide rewards for you and your employee.

At first glance, the models may seem oversimplified, but there is subtle and significant psychology built into the phrasings and approach, as you probably have recognized. Once you have had a little practice knitting the inner and outer patterns together, using these models will become progressively easier.

# DIRECTED LISTENING FORMAT

## The Outer Pattern (or Game Plan)

