

## Productive Performance Reviews

*The author of this article, Diane Pratt is the Director of Product Development for KnowledgePoint. She wrote the human resources advice for and helped design KnowledgePoint's performance review software, Performance Now!.*

There has been a tremendous amount written about the importance of performance reviews in the event of a legal challenge. I know, because I've written about those same issues and the media regularly reports the increasing impact of employment litigation.

It's true – well-written, thorough reviews put you on firmer ground when you need to support your actions. It's no wonder that performance review training and articles stress the handling of performance problems and difficult employees.

Often, not as much attention is given to reviewing the majority of hard-working and valued employees who are just doing their jobs. They may receive only a cursory review and walk out of the discussion relieved that there's no bad news. But was anything gained out of the discussion beyond having a completed review form for the file? And what about empowerment -- the big buzzword these days? It's based on the belief that employees who have more accountability and make their own decisions will be more effective.

It sounds good, but the typical performance review process (manager rates employee, manager tells employee, employee responds) seems contrary to the idea of the employee taking greater responsibility for performance.

**Let the Employee Start.** The most productive review discussions are candid, honest, and two-way. To encourage employee participation and better communications, many organizations ask employees to do a self-review and bring it to the review discussion meeting.

However, the manager also comes to the meeting with a review. While the manager may incorporate changes based on the employee's input, the employee can still feel as if the manager's opinions are already formed. Not exactly the most conducive set-up for mutual problem solving and sharing.

Instead, consider the following two-step meeting method for a performance review. The employee conducts the first meeting; you conduct the second meeting.

**Two-Meeting Method.** Introducing this process can reduce the employee's natural perception of being judged, provide you with more candid, direct input, and yet still produce a documented review for the record.

1. Two weeks before the review meeting, allocate on-the-job time for the employee to prepare for the first review meeting. The employee should be prepared to present his or her understanding of the responsibilities and expectations of the job, identify obstacles that impede performance, discuss future goals and plans, tell you what actions you could take that would help, and raise other job-related issues.
2. Hold the first meeting with the employee presenting the self-review and giving you feedback. Listen, take notes, ask questions if you don't understand something, but do not give feedback, disagree, or justify anything during this meeting.
3. At the close of the meeting, set a time to get back together within the week for you to give your feedback. (Sound strange? Not really – it's exactly the same steps you would have followed if you had run the meeting and done most of the talking. You may feel vulnerable, but that's exactly what employees feel when you take the lead.)
4. Before the second meeting, complete your review of the employee's performance, taking into consideration what the employee said, as well as your own observations, records, and feedback from others.
5. Hold the second meeting. Talk through your appraisal of the employee's performance, acknowledging and discussing differences in opinion, and plan together for the future.
6. Out of that meeting comes the completed performance review.

**Won't Two Meetings be Twice the Work?** So why have two meetings – why not do it all at the first one? Because very often, even when the employee participates, the manager usually does the telling and the employee too often listens. At worst, the employee becomes defensive or a tug of war ensues. The two-meeting method guarantees you are listening instead of thinking about what to say next.

Evaluate the employee and complete your review after you have gotten the employee's input. The resulting review will address the issues the employee raised in addition to the issues you planned to cover.

By having an interval between the two meetings, you aren't on the spot to respond immediately. You have time to analyze the reasons for any gaps between the

employee's and your views of responsibilities, expectations, and performance. You also have time to consider how to resolve those gaps.

The two-meeting method isn't appropriate for every situation, but it can be an excellent way to involve employees more in the review process. You don't even need to revise your forms or policies. Putting a new slant on the review process can transform it from a report card to a productive management tool.