

Writing and giving performance reviews: 8 do's and don'ts

Anything less than a completely honest performance appraisal will only cheat the employee out of personal development, plus it could set the stage for a discrimination lawsuit.

Here are eight important do's and don'ts:

1. DON'T fall prey to 'halo effect'

Managers sometimes allow a single characteristic to influence their ratings of other unrelated factors. Say an employee is willing and capable of taking on any project. That outstanding trait can cause you to ignore a worker's shortcomings. It just feels wrong to give Joyce a 10 on initiative and a meager 5 on everything else. But it may be accurate.

Advice: Eliminate the halo effect by considering each performance element independently.

2. DON'T be overly lenient

Less experienced managers often feel uneasy about criticizing employees' efforts. And seasoned managers may allow emotion to cloud the judgment of their long-term employees.

Leniency hurts company performance because it fails to flag weaknesses. Plus, in court, employees fired for poor performance will point to positive reviews as proof of discrimination.

3. DON'T be overly strict

The opposite problem—overly harsh assessments—is just as demoralizing for workers who make consistent contributions. When you believe that anything an employee does is part of his job description, you leave the employee with no incentive to excel at his job.

Advice: Managers need to define their expectations and identify behavior that falls short of or exceeds those requirements. This should be done through consistent feedback—not just on review day—so that the review process becomes a simple task of matching behavior to established standards.

4. DO go high and low

"Central tendency assessment" occurs when a supervisor gives all workers average ratings. This attitude can depress employee morale and indicate that the supervisor isn't doing his or her job.

Advice: Keep detailed employee logs and record instances of superior and inferior performance.

5. DO focus on pros and cons

Many managers give short shrift to work areas in which the employee excels. They focus almost exclusively on weaknesses and “needs improvement” areas. Give equal time to each aspect of the performance appraisal, regardless of the assessment. Don’t nitpick or try to find something wrong where no problems exist.

6. DON’T compare workers

There’s no need to discuss how other workers achieve their goals. This allows the discussion to shift away from the core issue: his or her work. Drawing comparisons among workers only builds resentment. Assume that all your employees are capable of superior performance and talk only about ways to enhance their efforts.