Turn negative reviews into a positive experience: 7 strategies, 4 scripts

Surveys show that employees actually value negative feedback when it's delivered constructively. But a poor approach can cause resentment and further job disengagement.

Here are 7 tips to follow when giving your next review:

1. Introduce the criticisms by clarifying your goals and intentions. For example, say, "I want your work to improve so that you can become a top performer."

2. Criticize constructively by explaining precisely what the employee must do to improve in nonjudgmental terms.

For example, don't say, "You have poor time management" and leave it at that. Say, "You must prioritize your tasks better, figure how long it will take to complete them, and do so more quickly to become more productive."

3. Be as specific as possible. Instead of saying, "Don't make your reports so long," say, "Shorten your reports to five to eight pages maximum."

Address each problem individually. Cite specific examples and let the employee respond. Don't bring up a new problem until you've thoroughly discussed the current one.

4. Don't always preface criticism with a compliment because it comes across as insincere and delivers mixed messages. For example, don't say, "You are a good employee but you never get to work on time." Instead, get straight to the criticism in a factual way: "During the past month, you were more than 20 minutes late on six separate days. The job requires that you arrive on time."

5. Be prepared with documentation. If you'll be citing major flaws in the employee's work, be prepared to show concrete examples at the review. Otherwise, the employee may shrug off your comments as hyperbole.

6. Be prepared for a counterattack. Is there any chance the employee will complain about unclear explanations or lack of supervision from you?

7. Finally, develop a plan for improvement. Your review preparation should always include a plan for helping the employee improve performance. During the meeting, the employee may suggest additional solutions.

In the end, you should have a concrete plan on paper for improving performance, including benchmarks, a timeline and consequences if those short-term goals aren't met. This will allow the employee to leave the meeting with a clear road map to getting back on a path to success.

Rewriting the script: 4 examples

Supervisors are more successful in performance reviews when they use clear, nonjudgmental language that focuses on results and behavior. Notice the differences here:

Negative: "Your work has been sloppy lately." *(too vague)*

Positive: "Your last three reports contained an unacceptable number of statistical errors." *(cites specifics)*

Negative: "Don't you bother to proofread anything anymore?" *(accusatory tone)*

Positive: "Is there a reason these errors are still occurring?" *(gives employee a chance to explain)*

Negative: "You're obviously not a mathematician." *(focuses on person, not performance)*

Positive: "I know you're capable of producing more accurate work." *(reaffirms confidence in employee's abilities)*

Negative: "Don't let it happen again." *(blanket demands)*

Positive: "How can we prevent errors from creeping into reports?" *(asks for feedback on improving performance)*