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Performance reviews: 12 pitfalls to avoid

You know the drill. An employee’s evaluation meeting is approaching and you’re all set. You’ve got your detailed notes, you’ve set the time, reserved the room. You’ll establish the tone, show respect and steer the conversation.

But here's a list of common traps that can trip up even the most-prepared manager. Such blunders can not only deflate the morale of an employee, but also plant the seeds for a lawsuit down the road.

1. **Using stereotypes** rather than first-hand observations (e.g., rating male employees higher than female employees in leadership skills based on gender alone).
2. **Letting personal feelings influence the assessment** (e.g., rating employees favorably because they are friendly with the manager outside of work; rating employees poorly because they’ve previously butted heads with the manager).
3. **Rating all employees as average.** Taking the easy way out will ultimately drive away top performers and encourage poor performers to stay at their same low performance level.
4. **Inflating the ratings of poor performers.** Some managers assume an inflated rating will motivate employees to improve their behavior. But most do so to avoid having a confrontation or because they don’t know how to correct their employee’s problem behavior. Ignoring employee problems only allows the problems to grow.
5. **Relying only on recent performance.** The review should cover the entire review period (usually 12 months) and should address the employee’s growth (or lack thereof) over that period.
6. **Equating long tenure with positive performance.** An assumption that an employee has been with the company for a long time because he or she is a good worker can be erroneous. Managers should be on the lookout for veteran employees who are actually stuck in a rut and may be content to simply “get by” instead of consciously trying to excel.
7. **Basing employee ratings on the manager’s own ratings.** Some managers assume that their status alone makes them the hands-down top performer in their department. So if they receive an average overall rating, they will not let their employees’ ratings exceed average.
8. **Putting too much emphasis on how employees stack up against other employees rather than on how they fare against objective performance standards and expectations.** Using forced rankings or ranking on a bell curve can result in good performers being unfairly rated as poor.
9. **Failing to explain reasons for the ratings.** An appraisal form with no comment fields completed is unacceptable. So, too, are comments that aren’t specific. Managers should always provide concrete examples that back up their ratings.
10. **Making backhanded compliments,** e.g., “You did a great job on the Tucker account, Jill, especially for your age.”
11. **Focusing on personal characteristics and not on behaviors.** Managers are not supposed to be judging employees as human beings; they are to evaluate employees’ job performance and workplace

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behaviors. Areas to focus on: time management skills, teamwork, professionalism, organizational skills, communication, judgment, job knowledge, initiative, and dependability.

12. **Interpreting motives behind behavior, instead of just stating the behavior,** e.g., “Shane isn’t committed to the job. That’s why he was late to work 21 times.” Stick with objective facts.

Just the facts

“Just the facts” should be every manager’s performance appraisal mantra. They must never allow personal feelings to enter the review. It is much harder for employees to argue with objective facts. Throwing in criticism of the person, rather than the problem, may be tempting, but wholly unnecessary and unproductive.

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