

Create a feedback loop

One of the most important but vastly overlooked aspects of good management is telling employees how they're doing. Many workers operate in the dark, wondering whether the boss loves or hates them.

In **Performance Management** (McGraw-Hill, 1999), Robert Bacal argues that periodic appraisals aren't enough. Rather, he proposes a more systematic way to motivate employees by providing continual feedback on their work. Bacal, a trainer and consultant, emphasizes the value of giving input about a staffer's present and future performance, not just the past.

Bacal claims that "performance planning" is more valuable than a formal performance review because it's forward-looking. He breaks down the stages of the planning process:

Discuss how you'll help the employee. Spell out your commitment to train, support and oversee the worker's progress. You might suggest seminars for the employee to attend or explain your open-door policy to ensure accessibility.

Identify problems, solutions. As you plan how employees will improve, don't shy away from confronting obstacles. An upcoming office relocation may block a worker's ability to attain key goals. Break through such barriers by finding ways for individuals to persevere, perhaps by working from home on an interim basis.

Agree on priorities. Bacal writes that part of planning is to reach "a common understanding about the job." That means defining levels of responsibility and making it clear how you intend to hold the employee accountable. Prioritizing a list of job duties can demystify this process and guide staffers to better manage their time.