

Career Compass No. 83: How Do I Have Energizing Performance Conversations with Direct Reports?

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By Frank Benest | Jul 6, 2020 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank -

*I'm an administrative services manager in a large special district. I have five direct reports who are talented and mostly want to be challenged and grow. Once a year I'm required to complete a performance evaluation for each of my direct reports and then meet individually with them to review the evaluation. **What a waste of time! I hate performance evaluations!***



This annual ritual sucks the life out of me as well as my employees. In addition, when I meet with an employee to go over the review, the staff person seems to get defensive even if it is a mostly good performance review.

I can't avoid the performance evaluation. However, do you have any suggestions to make it a better and more energizing experience?

When I was a senior manager, I, too, hated annual performance evaluations. Typical performance reviews are perfunctory exercises that don't seem to create much value and certainly eat up too much time for everyone. Managers disliked the experience and so did employees. In fact, a number of corporations such as Deloitte, Adobe, Microsoft,

IBM, Accenture, and most recently GE have eliminated performance evaluations and instead are now focusing on providing ongoing “performance conversations.” Deloitte, for instance, has freed up 1.8 million hours of staff time by eliminating annual evaluations.

Some local governments are following suit and are experimenting with monthly or quarterly conversations that tend to be more energizing and support employee self-motivation.

The Good and Bad of Performance Discussions

At a recent training workshop that I conducted on “Coaching Employees for Success,” participants identified the key ingredients or characteristics of performance discussions that energized them and supported their self-motivation and the ingredients or characteristics of de-energizing conversations.

Mirroring your experience, de-energizing performance conversations were characterized by the following statements from participants in the workshop:

- “My manager did most of the talking.”
- The discussion was mostly “backward-looking.”
- “My supervisor was not open to my perspectives.”
- The manager was “accusatory” and “blaming.”
- “There was no mutual problem-solving.”
- Expectations were not clarified.
- There was no real conversation—“I was talked at.”
- Mistakes were not considered “opportunities to learn.”
- “There was no discussion about what I learned or wanted to learn in the future.”
- “I didn’t sense much appreciation for my efforts.”
- “I didn’t feel that the manager cared about me.”

In contrast, energizing performance conversations that supported the employee’s self-motivation were characterized by these comments from participants in the workshop:

- “My manager was accessible, gave me ample time, and was not distracted during the conversation.”
- “It was a collaborative, two-way conversation.”
- “The discussion was “forward-looking.”
- “My supervisor listened to me and my perspectives, especially about what was challenging me.”
- “My manager saw potential in me and believed in me.”
- “She was willing to back me up.”
- “My manager viewed mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow.”
- “He trusted in me to figure things out.”
- “My supervisor showed appreciation for my contributions.”
- “He cared about me and my future.”

These are the classic ingredients to energizing and de-energizing performance conversations.

The Relationship of Performance Conversations to Talent Development and Employee Engagement

As documented by the Cal-ICMA Talent Initiative, local government agencies are in a war for talent. . . and we are losing the war. We can no longer “poach” talent from other local governments; rather, we must grow our own. Talent is mobile and can go anywhere. Talented employees will tend to stay with an organization as long as they are challenged, engaged, and energized.

Therefore, performance conversations are central to the tasks of clarifying expectations, challenging employees, helping them learn and grow, and guiding them to higher levels of performance. (See [Cal-ICMA Talent 2.0 Report](#).)

Employee engagement is the most important lever for effective leaders. With respect to employee engagement, the key relationship is the direct supervisor/employee relationship. One-to-one performance conversations are critical to employee engagement.

By engaging direct reports in productive performance conversations, managers/coaches can

- Help the employee find meaning and purpose in the work.
- Help them make connections between their work and contributions to the organization’s mission and purpose.
- Communicate what is expected of the employee.
- “Give a voice” to the employee in respect to their experiences and perspectives.
- Provide opportunities to learn and grow.
- Provide recognition for the work and express appreciation for the person.
- Help create an environment where there is a sense of community and belonging.

The factors above generate employee engagement. Employee engagement leads directly to higher levels of performance, productivity, discretionary effort, and adaptability. (See [Career Compass No. 37 “Engaging Employees For Success”](#) and [Career Compass #68 “My One-to-One Meetings Are a Waste of Time.”](#))

The Manager’s Role

Most managers see their primary role as “pushing out the work.” Unfortunately, few managers see “growing talent” as one of their primary responsibilities.

To paraphrase Dan Gable, “The manager’s role is mere overhead if the manager is not bringing out the best in people.” (See [“How Humble Leadership Really Works,”](#) ([hbr.org](#)),

April 23, 2018.) We managers are just another cost unless we are developing and growing talent.

In her book *Multipliers—How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*, Liz Wiseman identifies two distinct manager prototypes. A “diminisher” is a manager who **tells** you what to do and then **tests** you to see if you’ve done it. In the process, the manager diminishes the capabilities of the people around them. Diminishers tend to be micro-managers and know-it-alls.

In contrast, a “multiplier” is a manager who provides stretching job assignments and other learning opportunities to employees and thus **amplifies** the capabilities and smarts of people around them.

So, the challenge is how do we develop people as we support them in doing the work. Talent development and employee engagement are not added burdens for managers. We integrate talent development and employee engagement into how we relate and interact with staff.

Performance Coaching—What Is It?

Let’s first define performance coaching. Performance coaching is an ongoing process of engaging employees in a **two-way conversation** about job expectations, what is working well, what is not working so well, what is the employee learning, and how employees can improve their skills and competencies and thus make a bigger contribution. Through this communication and coaching process, performance coaching raises the performance of individuals, teams, and the organization. The dialogue also better connects the employee’s work to organizational purpose and values.

Performance coaching is built on ongoing conversation. Performance conversations are two-way communication. There is a mutual sharing of expectations, perspectives, and needs.

The goals of performance coaching include:

- Build and support the relationship between the manager/coach and the employee.
- Share perspectives (and be open to them).
- Demonstrate empathy for the employee and any struggles that the employee is grappling with.
- Recognize and reinforce positive performance and behavior.
- Focus on learning, especially learning from mistakes.
- Clarify expectations.
- Provide needed resources and support for the employee.
- Enhance individual, team and organizational performance.

Managing vs. Coaching

While coaching is a role for managers, coaching is distinct from managing. Managing is about planning, organizing, directing, and controlling resources to achieve organizational goals. Coaching is about empowering employees to explore, enabling them to learn, encouraging them to stretch, guiding their progress, and removing obstacles for success.

As indicated by Don Levonius (“[Employee Performance Coaching](#),” [Association of Talent Development](#) newsletter, 2014), there are two different mindsets and roles:

<u>Managing</u>	<u>Coaching</u>
Tell	Ask and Listen
Judge	Discuss
Control	Empower
Direct	Guide and Support
Discipline	Develop

Leadership in general and coaching in particular are more about asking questions than providing answers. Dan Rockwell ([Leadership Freak blog, Aug 4, 2017](#)) suggests that asking questions and listening increase your influence.

Questions to Stimulate Conversation

To promote dialogue, the manager can ask some questions, listen to the responses, and paraphrase what he or she hears. Some classic questions include:

- What is working well for you?
- What are you most proud of this quarter?
- What have you really enjoyed doing? What has energized you?
- What is currently challenging you and in what ways are you being challenged?
- What are you learning? How can the rest of us benefit from what you are learning?
- To move toward success, what issues, problems or challenges do you anticipate in the next quarter?
- How will you address these challenges?
- What progress are you making?
- What could you stop doing to maximize the value or the results that you deliver for us?
- What additional support might you need? How can I better support your growth and learning?

Nine Feedback Tips

At some point in the conversation, the manager may be providing feedback about performance. Here are nine tips:

1. Make the conversation a regularly scheduled meeting.

The conversation can be once a week, once a month, or once a quarter depending on the needs of the employee and the manager. Some employees need little supervision and support so weekly meetings are not necessary. At a minimum, performance conversations are held once a quarter. Managers are encouraged to set a regular schedule based upon their needs and the needs of their direct report.

2. Ask open-ended questions to promote a two-way conversation.

Open-ended questions (like those above--where there are no “yes” or “no” answers) stimulate conversation and dialogue. The manager will discover valuable information and explore problems and challenges by asking questions.

3. Recognize positive efforts and contributions.

All of us want our work and contributions to be recognized. Performance conversations are one forum to do so. In addition to recognizing the good work of the employee, the manager can also express appreciation for the person and what that employee brings to the team and organization.

4. Focus on the behavior, not the employee.

Feedback about what you have observed about behavior is easier to consider by the employee since it is not personal.

5. Provide facts not emotions.

Facts or observations (for example, “I noticed that you were late to work three times in last two weeks”) help the employee focus on the behavior. In addition, the manager must manage his or her emotions. Modeling emotional control will help the employee manage their emotions as well. The manager will also want to acknowledge and let go of any personal judgments, assumptions or biases they may be making.

6. Use specific examples of the behavior and identify the effect of the behavior.

Instead of citing general behavior, the manager should use specific examples of the behavior and identify the impact of the behavior on the team, the organization or customers. For example, “When you are late, others on the team must not only do their work but also step in and fill the gap created by your absence.”

7. Be direct and compassionate.

The manager needs to be direct and forthright in stating the concern. However, the manager can also demonstrate some empathy for the employee in acknowledging any frustrations or personal struggles that are challenging the employee. Empathy and compassion come from inquiring about and understanding the employee’s perspective.

8. Make the conversation forward-looking.

While you may be exploring past behavior and performance, you don't want to dwell on the past. You want to focus on the future and how to correct any problems going forward.

9. Use "I" statements.

Instead of using "you" statements (for example, "you aren't performing for the team"), the manager can state "I feel that. . ." or "I believe that. . ." or "I am concerned that. . ."

A Sample Performance Conversation

Here is a sample performance conversation.

The Situation

Employee

Maria is a traffic engineer assigned for the first time to plan and implement a neighborhood traffic calming project. Maria also has ongoing duties evaluating current development projects and making recommendations.

The neighborhood traffic calming project is lagging behind schedule. Some neighborhood residents are supportive of the project and some are not. Supporters have expressed their desire to reduce car speeds and increase safety, especially for pedestrians and bicyclists. Opponents are concerned with traffic back-up and difficulties moving through the neighborhood.

The Fire Department has also expressed some concerns about the reduction of two lanes to one lane in each direction and the increase in response times.

Maria is frustrated and is a bit defensive about what she sees as a lack of progress.

Manager

Frank is the traffic division manager in the Public Works Department. He is concerned about the missed project timelines as well as how Maria has responded to some neighborhood opposition. Frank wants to support Maria in her efforts, provide any guidance in solving the issues raised by the project, and generally help Maria stretch and grow as she tackles this challenge.

The Conversation

Manager

Maria, as I mentioned last week, I'd like to talk today about your neighborhood traffic calming project. I sense that you are putting a lot of effort into the project and it is meaningful to you. For you, why is it so important and worthwhile?

Employee

Yes, for me, it's all about safety for pedestrians and bicyclists and helping make the neighborhood a better or more livable place for all. Plus, I hope we have a success so the project can be duplicated elsewhere in Hayward.

Manager

I agree. So, what's working for you?

Employee

Well, I have collected a lot of good data about average car speeds at different times of the day and traffic accident counts, car-on-car and car-on-bicycles. We've also had two neighborhood meetings with good attendance. There's a lot of work associated with this special project but I am still on top of the three current development projects that I'm assigned.

Manager

You seem to be moving the project forward. What has been difficult or is not working so well for you?

Employee

The project is behind the original schedule, mainly due to neighbors, especially opponents, wanting more information and examples of where our recommendations have actually worked. I've also had to sit down one-to-one with some of the neighborhood leaders which has taken some extra time. The Fire Department staff are also expressing concerns about response times if we reduce lanes. I'm trying to connect fire staff with their counterparts in other cities where traffic calming seems to be working.

I want to get this project in front of the Transportation and Planning Commission sooner than later, so all this extra work and time delays are frustrating.

Manager

I see that you are making progress. You have collected a lot of good data as well reactions pro and con from the target neighborhood. You've gotten feedback from the Fire Department regarding their concerns.

I am concerned that we are behind schedule. How do you see this issue?

Employee

I know that we are behind schedule. However, I think that the original project schedule was unrealistic. Plus, there's more resistance than I expected.

Manager

I appreciate your honesty about the schedule. I am getting some pressure from the director about the missed timelines, but I will take another look at the schedule. Sometimes you need to go slow to go fast.

In terms of this project, what are you learning?

Employee

I'm learning a lot about neighborhood meetings and trying to generate support for a creative traffic safety approach. I've also picked up on a number of best practices from other cities which I am trying to integrate in our project.

Manager

Could you give me an example?

Employee

Yes. We certainly need to call this effort a pilot project or experiment. We should also ensure that we collect data about car speeds at different times of the day and collision data. It would also be helpful to work with the elementary and middle school in the area to determine if bike usage has increased during the pilot.

Manager

What are you learning about neighborhood meetings?

Employee

Sometimes it's hard to predict what issues people will raise. I've learned that generating diverse perspectives is important but it can slow the process, and you need to create a space where people are comfortable sharing their ideas.

Manager

May I offer some feedback and perhaps a suggestion or two for you to consider?

Employee

Sure.

Manager

I attended your last meeting with the neighborhood and everyone had their say, which was good. I felt that you may have minimized some of the objections and concerns raised by the opponents.

Employee

Well, some people just don't get it. What we're trying to do is improve safety. All they care about is getting through the area.

Manager

Given your commitment to improving safety, this opposition must be quite frustrating for you.

May I share a personal experience?

Employee

Sure.

Manager

When I worked in the Traffic Department in Brea, California, we wanted to revitalize the downtown Main Street so we developed a “complete streets” proposal. The plan was developed by city staff with little community input and everyone rebelled. The other staff and I were quite frustrated. The council finally directed us to start all over. With the help of an outside firm, we developed three options which incorporated people’s ideas and responded to their concerns. Because the final proposal had everyone’s fingerprints on it, community people, as well as staff, owned the winning solution.

At the next meeting, how might you better acknowledge and summarize people’s concerns and tie some of our recommendations to the concerns even though we may not be able to resolve all their problems?

Employee

Well, maybe one thing that my team and I could do better is anticipate questions and then, rather than offering solutions, lead the conversation so the meeting participants develop possible solutions.

Manager

That’s a good idea.

Given the diverse perspectives about the project, another possible idea is to tweak our notion of project “success” so it includes not just increasing pedestrian and bike safety but also minimizing any car back-ups. This will help us get everyone’s “fingerprints” on the project solution.

Employee

Yes, we can tweak what project success looks like.

Manager

How can I help or support your efforts?

Employee

After the Fire Department staff contacts some of the other cities, I’ll continue to talk to them to see how we can respond to their issues. It would be helpful if you could talk to the fire chief so she can encourage her staff to be creative in addressing their issues with us.

Manager

Yes, I can do that.

Employee

After the next neighborhood meeting, I’ll check back with you and then you could work with me to schedule a study session with the commission.

Manager

Okay.

What are one or two key steps moving forward for you, especially to ensure that neighbors as well as fire staff feel that they are being heard?

Employee

Well, I'll meet this week with the Fire Department staff and make some suggestions to minimize their concerns. I'll work with them on getting their feedback and perhaps revising the suggestions so they work for all of us.

I'll also meet one-on-one with some of the leaders supporting and opposing the project to share our work, acknowledge their issues, and discuss how to minimize the problems that they have. Then we can schedule by the end of the month another neighborhood meeting to share what "success" looks like and how we responded to what we heard. We'll get feedback and be open to improving the solutions so everyone can feel involved.

Manager

Great. Let's get together before the next neighborhood meeting and you can share how you're going to facilitate the meeting. And, I'll work on revising the project timeline after I meet with the director.

Employee

Okay.

Manager

I appreciate your commitment to this important project.

Outcomes of the Conversation

The conversation achieved a number of positive outcomes, including:

- The manager helped the employee explore the meaning behind the project.
- The manager asked questions to get the employee's perspective.
- The employee felt heard.
- Based on the conversation, the manager changed his mind about the schedule.
- The manager focused on progress and learning.
- The manager offered assistance but kept the responsibility with the employee.
- With the manager, the employee identified some steps forward.
- The manager expressed appreciation for the efforts of the employee.
- The conversation reinforced the relationship between the manager and employee.

Regular Performance Conversations versus the Annual Performance Evaluation

If you conduct regular performance conversations (for instance, on a quarterly basis), the annual performance evaluation can summarize the key issues:

- What's working well.
- What's not working so well.
- What is the employee learning.
- What are the results and other contributions of the employee.

Therefore, a best practice is to write some notes summarizing each monthly or quarterly conversation and throwing the notes in a file. These notes will help you prepare for the next conversation. Plus, they will form the basis for the annual review. . .and make it less burdensome and onerous.

We all want to be energized at work. One-to-one performance conversations can support our self-motivation, challenge us, and help us get better and better at what we do.

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