



Is It Time To Rethink Your Performance Review System?

By Jerome Shore

I was with a client yesterday who is the managing partner of a mid-sized law firm in Toronto.

He was saying how it was going to be a tough day because he had to present three performance reviews to young lawyers in his firm. Reactions to performance reviews can make them scary to present. In our stress management workshops, many managers report that performance reviews are one task they put off until the last moment because it's such a distasteful process.

In my experience the general reaction to a performance review is like a porcupine's needles expanding when they're frightened. People often tense up as the performance review begins with the hair on the back of their neck rising. That's a hardwired reaction to danger, just like the porcupine's.

My client and I talked about what could be different to make the performance review a more palatable process. We came up with these four preliminary ideas. This happened over breakfast, not dinner, so we were relatively restrained in our creativity.

1) Goal setting should be a separate exercise, done in advance of performance reviews. This would allow for the performance review to be a 'progress report' rather than an evaluation test. That is, a progress report towards meeting mutually agreed goals. When it's an evaluation the reviewee's ego gets involved protecting them from information they feel uncomfortable hearing. When their pride is hurt they can lash out. That makes the process unattractive.

2) When progress is measured, performance isn't measured on a yes/no basis but rather on an 'evolutionary' basis. As people make progress toward their goals, coaching from their manager can be very effective to supplement and complement day to day experience. That can really enhance the role of the manager.

3) People who are getting their performance review [the reviewee] should go through a process in advance. Many already are asked to prepare their own appraisal to compare to 'management's' thoughts. We thought that some things reviewees could learn in advance are; how to receive feedback assertively by asking the right questions [e.g. "can you tell me more about that?"], how to enroll their manager in their objectives by being thoughtful and specific about what they want for their career and how to get more specific about the 'difference that will make a difference' by asking what it would be.

4) Managers who deliver performance reviews should get a grounding in 'performance coaching'. That is what they could be doing to motivate the reviewee during the performance review to enhance performance. This could include tips for . . . giving feedback, igniting motivation, overcoming poor performance and communicating across generations.

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Jerome Shore is an Executive Coach and Managing Partner of The Coaching Clinic. Jerome and his partner, Marjorie Shore, coach lawyers on topics ranging from Business Development, Career Transition, Resilient Thinking, Intergenerational Communication, Successful Return from Mat Leave and Stress Management. They can be reached at 416-787-5555 or coach@coachingclinic.com or margie@coachingclinic.com. Their website is at www.coachingclinic.com.