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Evaluations That Inspire

BY CAROLEE COLTER AND ALLEN SEIDNER

Mary Jones had reason to look forward with optimism to her upcoming performance review. She felt that over the past six months she had built a track record of good solid performance working as a cook in the co-op kitchen. She was consistently punctual, reliable, productive, and efficient. As a cooperative team member she had filled in many extra days during a coworkers long stay at the hospital. Moreover, Mary took seriously the departments principle of achieving continuous incremental improvement. She had come up with several new recipes that were popular with customers and recently developed a prep technique that shaved a couple hours a week off a prior practice.

True, it was disconcerting that her evaluation was already a month late. But she felt she got along well with her supervisor, Kurt the kitchen manager, and expected he'd note her strong performance and let her know how much he appreciated her contribution.

At the start of the meeting, Kurt appeared nervous and uncomfortable. He rushed through the meeting, looking down at the filled-out evaluation form in his hand, rather than looking Mary in the eye. He spent a few minutes on some unspecific, general praise: You're a great worker, Mary. You're on time, you work hard, and you have good ideas. Were glad you're part of the team. However, he spent a great deal more time reminding her of a recent time when she forgot to put some chili in an ice bath, and the one time she was late during the pre-Thanksgiving rush.

To her consternation, he told her that several of her coworkers had complained about her being bossy, though he quickly added that he didn't agree. Don't worry about what they say. They just need a kick in the pants now and then, he joked, but Mary was too upset to feel reassured.

After 20 minutes spent speeding through the evaluation form, Kurt brought the meeting to a close with the news that he was giving Mary a \$1.00 per hour raise for all your excellent work. Mary was stunned. This was double the average raise. But instead of leaving the meeting feeling motivated and energized, she felt demoralized and disrespected.

Kurt's intentions were good, and he was baffled by Mary's subdued response. He felt he had given her the positive evaluation and better-than-average wage increase she deserved. So how did things go awry?

- Late evaluation: Being on time with staff evaluations is a simple matter of respect. Even a retroactive pay raise doesn't erase the message of a late evaluation: that the employee is not important.
- General, nonspecific praise: Vague, sweeping statements without specific examples of what an employee does well could leave her with the impression that the manager hasn't really noticed her work.
- Imbalance of time spent on criticism vs. praise: The time Kurt spent on Mary's areas for improvement was not reflective of her actual performance. Evidently, he felt it more important to remind Mary of her being late once a few months ago than to tell her the many specific reasons why he appreciates her as a member of his team. At least that's what Mary took away from the meeting.
- Passing on coworker criticisms without owning them: One hurtful comment from a coworker can spoil the whole evaluation for an employee. At the very least, it will cause her to lose focus from the message the manager is trying to impart.
- No time for the employee to speak: Turning the evaluation into a conversation will do more to make the employee feel valued and respected than a one-sided soliloquy.
- Dwelling on the past: Kurt missed an obvious opportunity for turning the evaluation into a productive and motivating conversation when he failed to set aside time to discuss Mary's future at the co-op.
- Thinking the size of the raise would do the talking: Sure, Mary deserved a better-than-average raise for her consistently superior performance and her continued skill set development. But could the added quarters-per-hour make up for the psychic emptiness of leaving a review without the specific and genuine support of her direct supervisor?

The first performance evaluation should take place 30 to 90 days after hiring, according to your stores policy. Thereafter, for nonmanagement staff we recommend scheduling an evaluation every six months. It's not healthy for you or your employees to go an entire year between performance reviews. Done properly with a focus on the future, performance reviews are a critical opportunity to guide and inspire entry-level workers we'd prefer not to turn over so often. The evaluation instrument the form that the manager and employee fill out is not as important as the delivery. The best instrument in the world won't keep an employee from feeling downcast if the delivery is hasty, nonspecific and doesn't leave room for the employee to share her own views.

The easy part of an evaluation is the assessment of past performance. The challenge and the opportunity come in your ability to create a conversation that focuses on the employee's future in your co-op, a conversation that leaves her feeling that she works in an organization that is worthy of her best talent and energy.

Here are some guidelines for conducting evaluations that will inspire your staff.

Focus on the future

As a rule of thumb, spend no more than half the total time of the review assessing past performance, and spend at least 15 minutes discussing the employee's future. Kitchen manager Kurt could have turned the entire experience around by adding: Let's talk about your future here in the kitchen. In the months ahead what new things would you like to develop or learn? Where do you want to go from here, Mary?

Do your homework

Plan what you will say don't wing it. Jot down notes on areas where the employee has performed well and think of specific examples. Put at least as much time and detail into citing examples of good performance as areas for improvement.

Review the personnel files and refresh your memory on the goals set at the previous evaluation. Too often the previous goals are forgotten by the time the next evaluation comes around. Either on the evaluation instrument or in the meeting, ask the employee how she felt she did on each goal before giving your assessment.

Invite self-evaluation

If you have the employee evaluate her own performance by filling out her own form first, that will bring a wealth of additional information from which to generate a meaningful conversation. You can read her self-evaluation before coming to the meeting, or read it for the first time when you meet. Note where your opinions coincide and differ. If the employee acknowledges an area for improvement that you see, too, you need not spend as much time discussing that as an area where you and the employee don't see eye to eye.

Because most employees will be harder on themselves than you will in completing an evaluation form, you won't always have to be the one to bring up difficult subjects, and you'll often get to play the good guy. Actually, Mary, I think you're a lot better at dealing with crises than the score you gave yourself.

Give the employee time to speak at numerous points throughout the meeting. Pause and invite comments after yours on each area for praise, each area for improvement, and each future goal. Simply allowing enough time to genuinely listen will make it easier for you to make the evaluation conversation meaningful and inspiring.

Coworker feedback handle with care

If you collect feedback from coworkers, consider it for your eyes only. Comments from coworkers may cause you to do more research before the evaluation meeting, or may reaffirm your own impressions. Only pass on to the employee what you already agree with, can explain and defend and phrase it so that it's coming from you, not coworkers.

Set goals for future growth

Ask the employee for her future goals before going into yours. Give her space on the evaluation instrument to tell you what she wants to be working on.

Some staff members will have clear and wonderful ideas for their own growth. Others will require that you generate ideas for an agenda that matches their abilities and interests with your departments needs.

I know you say that you're still happy as a cook, Juan, but you've been doing a great job in the same role for over a year now. You're a fast learner, extremely dependable, and everyone loves working with you. And, at a certain point in the game, you're going to cap out your wage at the ceiling for a cook. I know you can do more here, and for yourself, too. I think with your skills, attention to detail, and willingness to speak up when you think something should be different, I'd like to recommend we make a plan for you to train as a kitchen shift coordinator.

For most staff it should be easy to identify goals that are expansive rather than remedial. A strong performer could have goals along the lines of cross training in a new area, developing a new foodservice product program, researching and training coworkers on a relevant topic, or documenting department practices in a manual. For an uneven performer, the goals might need to include addressing a performance problem as well as developing a new skill or taking on a project. If an employee's evaluation calls for only remedial goals, you're probably talking to someone you should have let go well before now.

If a pay raise rides on an evaluation

If your co-op gives pay raises at the same time as performance reviews, be sure to do it right.

Focus expectations on the amount of raise that is typically awarded for good performance, not the maximum that an employee could earn. For example, if the range for a semi-annual raise is 25 cents to 75 cents an hour, talk about 50 cents as the amount to be expected in new employee orientations, in the staff handbook and in conversations about raises. Don't set your staff up to be disappointed if they don't get the top of the range for merit raises. If an employee demonstrates exceptional performance, let her know she's getting an exceptional raise.

If some aspect of an employee's performance, such as habitual tardiness, mars an otherwise strong performance, let him know that it caused his raise to be lower than it might have been. Emphasize that at the next evaluation, if he shows consistent improvement in that area, he can expect a higher raise.

Conclusion

In conducting a performance evaluation, what's the best possible outcome you could achieve? In almost every evaluation from one with the consistently awesome worker to the inconsistently decent one the best thing you can do with those twice-a-year 45-minute chunks of time is to leave them feeling inspired to bring more energy, creativity, and passion to their work in the months ahead.

Covering the specific performance evaluation content is important. But merely expressing that information misses the true opportunity. Leaders who develop the skills and dialogue necessary to use evaluation meetings to elicit passion and energy from the many different members of their team are well on their way to developing long-term star performers.

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