

# HOUSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

Strictly Houston. Strictly Business.

Week of December 19-25, 2009

## Performance evaluations shouldn't be a source of workplace stress

The annual performance evaluations process has a way of changing the workplace environment.

Both employees and supervisors can be on edge, partly because of the implications and outcomes associated with evaluations, and partly because of the administrative burden the process imposes.

No one really likes performance evaluations—neither the employees who have to condense a year of work into a brief list of accomplishments, nor the supervisors who have to document each employee's performance throughout the year to support the feedback they have to deliver.

The end result is often feedback that does little to help an employee understand the company's objectives, develop professionally or correct poor performance.

The "Four Ds" of performance management can help in the design of a performance evaluation process that is relevant and aligns employees to a company's goals without detracting from productivity or morale. They are:

- **Define:** Clearly defined goals and performance expectations eliminate uncertainty and ambiguity. For starters, companies should update job descriptions. While an employee may have been hired into a certain position, roles and responsibilities have a way of changing and it is important that job descriptions reflect the changes.

Supervisors should also work with employees to define individual goals and establish priorities based on organizational objectives. These also should change as the company's focus shifts.

Finally, supervisors should define an expected standard of performance and paint a clear picture for employees of what it takes to succeed.



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Set high standards, but be sure to provide the necessary tools and opportunities for employees to step up to those high standards. And, of course, reward those who meet or exceed those standards.

- **Document:** Documenting performance is perhaps the most taxing, yet important, component of performance management. Many supervisors find it difficult to maintain adequate performance files on employees, so when the time comes to discuss performance they have no specific examples to point to and the conversation becomes general and ineffective.

Supervisors should make notes about employee contributions or problems like a running to-do list. Not only is this helpful in providing relevant and concrete feedback, it becomes critical if poor performance needs to be addressed.

Supervisors can't possibly see everything. Companies may want to consider utilizing a 360-degree performance feedback system that can incorporate feedback from an employee's internal client groups, customers, peers or direct reports. Organizations that use 360 systems point to a number of advantages, including feedback that is more accurate and reflective of employees' true performance than feedback from the supervisor alone.

- **Discuss:** Too often we limit discussions about performance to a set time once a year, so the discussions grow in perceived significance and become more difficult for both supervisors and employees.

Human resource experts suggest it is far more effective to maintain an ongoing and open dialog about performance.

Frequent pats on the back for a job well done can contribute significantly to more positive morale and a more productive work environment.

Similarly, pointing out what employees are doing wrong as soon as it is noticed means they can modify their behavior immediately, whereas waiting until the end of a 12-month period to correct poor performance means bad habits are

likely to be ingrained and more difficult to correct.

While making performance an ongoing topic of informal discussions, it is still important to schedule more formal monthly or quarterly meetings to discuss an employee's projects and performance. Regular and ongoing dialog, instead of a once-a-year discussion, will help ensure employees are receiving timely and relevant feedback. These regular conversations also will help employees keep up with changing organizational objectives so they can align themselves accordingly.

- **Develop:** The goal of performance management should be focused toward employee development and the skills or characteristics the organization most wants to recognize and reward. The process need not be threatening or punitive. Instead, it should offer direction and opportunity for professional growth.

The product of each performance review should be a plan for the employee's continued development that outlines areas for additional training, sets new goals, establishes priorities, and perhaps even maps a path to a promotion or pay increase. Such a plan can become an agreement of sorts between the company and the employee, and can be a roadmap an employee refers to for direction and motivation.

Helpful advice alone will not make implementing and maintaining a performance management process any less effort.

But if companies are willing to make the investment, they will have a process that delivers productive feedback to employees and positive returns in the form of a high-performing work force.

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