



Powering Up Performance Conversations

the power of positive energy

by Performance Frontiers

Performance conversations can be tricky to navigate. What's intended to be a thoughtful and motivating exchange of feedback, can quickly devolve into a draining experience that zaps the motivation from both parties.

According to Gallupⁱ, over 80% of employees find performance reviews de-motivating, and only 14% of employees strongly agree that their performance review inspires them to improve. Another study found that performance reviews negatively impact performance one third of the time.ⁱⁱ Even *positive feedback*, has been statistically shown to cause a 38% decline in performance because people practice avoidance techniques, so as not to disrupt their self-image. And these studies were conducted pre-COVID – before we were facing extraordinary pressures and separated by screens that shield accurate message transmission as much as they shield viral transmission.

Recent researchⁱⁱⁱ has found that a leader's ability to positively energise team members is paramount. Individuals who work for a positively energising leader have significantly higher well-being, job satisfaction, engagement, and on the job performance.

So, how do leaders re-energise the review process for better outcomes? And how might our approach need to differ in COVID-19 working environments?

Energising the Experience:

We can heighten mutual levels of motivation and enthusiasm by infusing our reviews with positive energy, even if the feedback is challenging in nature. This is not about glossing over critical feedback or sandwiching the “bad” with the “good”. Instead, it’s about embodying key characteristics of an energising leader^{iv}.

Energising Leaders	De-energising Leaders
Help other people flourish	Are self-aggrandising
Are trustworthy and have integrity	Are superficial and inauthentic
Are dependable	Often do not follow-through
Use appreciative and constructive language	Are frequently critical
Are mindful and fully engaged	Do not show concern for others
Are genuine and authentic	Are inflexible in their thinking
See opportunities	Mostly see roadblocks and obstacles
Solve problems and solution-build	Create problems/ a sense of division that’s not really there
Are positive, playful and have fun	Are mostly sombre and solemn
Express gratitude and humility	Do not allow others to be valued

With these characteristics in mind:

- **Be authentic with positive intent** – make it clear the intention is to learn and improve rather than expose, shame or blame. This conversation shouldn’t be cold and clinical. A warm, authentic approach is key.
- **Ask curious questions** – Studies indicate a direct correlation between beginning with the reviewer questioning and listening (rather than giving judgements), and an employee’s ability to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses. Team members who are sincerely and actively listened to are more self-aware and relaxed and interested in other ideas and attitudes, leading to a greater opportunity for growth.
- **Express gratitude** – Significance and contribution are two core human needs. Recognise the unique contributions this person makes to the team as a whole (this can also be done with an intact team collectively, or with key partnerships). Name the unique strengths and capabilities they demonstrate and explain what you value about their contribution. Consider their effort, impact, attitude, and cultural contribution.
- **Stay constructive and opportunity focused** – Invite the reviewee’s own appraisal first and allow time to curiously explore together. Share observations and relevant data / insights with a focus on opportunity to give a sense of forward momentum, rather than being stuck on problems, dwelling too much on what happened and who said / did what.
- **Demonstrate humility** – Stay open to conflicting perspectives, and accept responsibility for your own learning. You may receive leadership feedback during this process too. Accept this feedback the same way you want your team member to accept your feedback.

- **Stay mindful and fully engaged in the conversation** – People mirror the level of energy invested by others.
- **Encourage self-set goals for the future** – Invite excitement for the future by exploring possibility i.e. “If we are to exceed our aspirations, become extraordinary and industry leading, how might you contribute?”. Offer suggestions, provoke thought and guide goal setting and ensure the team member plays an active, leading role in the process. Self-set goals are meaningful, and meaning propels us to continue striving for our goals, even when we face significant challenges.
- **Help team members flourish by leveraging their unique strengths** – When we use our strengths, we get a “strengths surge” - a boost that enhances our performance and well-being. Leverage this by helping them identify opportunities to use their strengths more.
- **Offer support** – Invite your team member to voice the support they need from you, and follow through post-conversation to show dependability.
- **Synthesise** – Afterwards, take the time to invite your team member to synthesise aloud. This will support them in making sense of both the concepts and the process, and affirm insights. Synthesis is an invaluable final step in the feedback loop.

COVID-19 Performance Review Considerations

First and foremost, ask yourself: Is now the time for a performance review?

Now, as in pre-COVID times, it’s important to **place care and compassion at the heart of your approach**. The primary reason for a performance review is to have a true dialogue that supports the growth of your team members, which, in turn, enhances individual, team, culture and business outcomes.

If the review cannot be delayed, take this time to have an open conversation about the experiences of the human being in front of you, with genuine curiosity and a focus on future possibility. **Ideally performance conversations are held in person, and regularly occur as part of an ongoing cycle of feedback.**

However, with much of our work occurring online due to physical distancing still in place, leaders have told us that **one of the greatest challenges lies in “reading people” through screens**. Heightened emotion is common during a performance conversation, and people may be facing exceptional personal challenges. It’s important to remain highly sensitive to emotion - particularly that which is not spoken, as a majority of the messages we send are non-verbal^{vi}. Pay attention to body language, facial expression and vocal tone, while listening carefully to words chosen. Use your understanding of the person’s “normal” state as a baseline to compare. Look for strained or pitchy vocal tones, tightness or erratic body movements, or inconsistencies between words, body language and voice. Trust your gut and navigate with care. You may want to verbally check-in on how they’re feeling, with a simple “Are you okay to continue exploring this?”, “How can I support you?”, or “Would you like to pause for a bit, and return to this a little later?”

And remember, in a pandemic swept world, **our measures for performance may need to be reviewed**. Not everything is as it was. KPIs set months ago may no longer hold the same relevancy. Weight should be placed on understanding how your team members are, what they are experiencing, and how you, as a leader, can support them to thrive into the future.

References

- i. Hilton, J. (2020) How to manage performance reviews remotely, HCA mag. <https://www.hcamag.com/au/specialisation/employee-engagement/how-to-manage-performance-reviews-remotely/221729>
- ii. Sutton, R. & Wigert, B (2019) More Harm Than Good: The Truth About Performance Reviews, Gallup. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23931880-400-lifting-the-lid-on-the-unconscious/>
- iii. Itschakov, G. & Kluger, A (2018) The Power of Listening in Helping People Change, Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2018/05/the-power-of-listening-in-helping-people-change>
- iv. Kim Cameron, 2013, Practicing Positive Leadership. https://booktopia.kh4ffx.net/c/1963871/585979/9632?prodsku=29074327&u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.booktopia.com.au%2Fpracticing-positive-leadership-kim-cameron%2Fbook%2F9781609949723.html%3Futm_source%3DEC-N%26utm_medium%3DCSE%26utm_campaign%3DECN_CPC
- v. Baker, W. (2016) The More You Energize Your Coworkers, the Better Everyone Performs, Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2016/09/the-energy-you-give-off-at-work-matters>
- vi. Segal, J., Smith, M. Robinson, L., Boose, G. M.A., Lawrence Robinson, & Greg Boose (2019) Nonverbal Communication, HelpGuide. <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/nonverbal-communication.htm>



©Copyright Performance Frontiers

STUDIO 1, 4 Lambert Road,
Indooroopilly, QLD. Australia. 4068

[P] +61 7 3870 8433

[E] info@performancefrontiers.com

performancefrontiers.com



Please read on screen to save paper,
but if you must print, please print
only the pages you need.