A MyPerformance Guide to Performance Conversations

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Elements of a Conversation

"A person isn't who they are during the last conversation you had with them – they're who they've been throughout your whole relationship." ~ RAINER MARIA WILKE

MyPerformance is all about the conversation between a supervisor and an employee. The objective is for all employees to be engaged in meaningful conversations about their performance and development. Research has demonstrated that trusted feedback between supervisors and employees has one of the greatest impacts on employee engagement, motivation and results, and everyone benefits when honest conversations are the norm. This guide is intended for employees and supervisors and will provide you with best practices for having these conversations.

There are several common elements to consider when preparing for a performance conversation, keeping in mind that the goal is to engage all employees in meaningful conversations about their performance and development. These conversations are a shared responsibility, with both an employee and a supervisor being active participants and preparing for them. These conversations should be ongoing, and they can be both formal and informal throughout the year. The elements below will go into more detail on where to put your focus as you prepare and have these conversations.

Preparing for the Conversation

Consider the timing, your own mindset and your clarity of thought. By focusing on what you really want from the conversation – for yourself and for the other person – you can keep the conversation positive and moving forward. Whether you are an employee or a supervisor, some questions to consider before having a conversation are:

- What is my intention?
- How do I want to approach this conversation?
- What is my focus for this conversation (inquiring, coaching, advising, requesting, directing, dealing with a specific situation or issue, etc.)?
- What is the impact I want to have?
- How will my body language mirror my intention?
- What could be impacting how I view the situation?
- What have I already said or done relating to the subject of this conversation?
- Have I contributed to this situation in some way (e.g. being unclear about expectations)?
- How can we obtain the best possible outcome?

Preparing yourself also includes considering which communication style is appropriate, given the person, the situation, and the intention of the conversation. For example, a supervisor may take a more directive approach with a new employee who is just learning the job and requires specific instructions. A coaching approach may be more appropriate if the conversation is about career goals. Know your audience and be aware of your own default style, possible biases and how they could support or take away from the conversation. When choosing the approach that fits the situation, you may also want to consider demographics. For instance, you will likely need to adjust your communication style for younger employees, who typically like to be well informed but don't like to be in lengthy meetings.

Be prepared to resist the temptation to respond quickly to any differing thoughts. It will be more productive to inquire into the other perspective. Instead, be ready to say: "Can you tell me more about that?"

Clear on Intent/Topic for Discussion

When you need to have a conversation with someone, it makes a tremendous difference if you briefly explain what you would like to talk about ahead of time, especially if it is a conversation you expect will require more time, effort and involvement. If this is the case, prior to the meeting state your intention:

"I would like to":

- give/receive feedback...
- provide advice about…
- give/get instructions…
- make plans for…
- negotiate about…
- explore possibilities…
- make a request…
- ask for support…etc.

Having the knowledge up front allows everyone the opportunity to better prepare for the topic, understand their role and participate in a conversation.

Be Specific: Support your Feedback with Clear Examples

Without clear examples, your message and feedback are less likely to be understood and applied. If you are a supervisor, providing facts and reasons behind your observations helps ensure you are evaluating job performance and not the person, and makes feedback easier to understand. Generalizations and unclear feedback, even of a positive nature, will have limited impact. As an example, consider which of the following feedback is more effective:

- "Good job, Aman."; or
- "Aman, that new procedure you developed for handling priority cases has really improved our customer satisfaction. Thanks for coming up with it."

In performance conversations, look at what work was delivered based on quality and quantity relative to job requirements, then how that work was done. Some people have found the STAR method (Situation, Task, Action, Result) of describing a situation a helpful structure for presenting examples. Here's an illustration using the scenario with Aman:

Situation

- Priority cases are being missed or incorrectly assigned during the intake process, resulting in delays and customer complaints are on the rise.

Task

- Find a way to ensure that cases are accurately reviewed and assigned appropriately for timely resolution.

Action

- Aman reviewed the existing process, identified inefficiencies and trouble spots, and worked collaboratively with intake staff to develop new procedures to correctly review and assign priority cases.

Result

- Priority cases are assigned and dealt with in a timelier manner, resulting in significantly improved customer satisfaction.

Effective Questioning

Asking effective questions is integral to having good performance conversations. Consider what it is you want to learn and determine the most appropriate type of questions to gain this information. Remain curious and ask well-formulated questions that encourage employees to look at their own performance and work behaviour.

You can encourage your conversation partners to share more of their thoughts and feelings by asking open-ended, rather than yes/no questions. Open-ended questions allow for a wide range of responses. For example, asking "How did you find your new work assignment?" will evoke a more detailed response than, "Did you like it?" (which could be answered with a simple "yes" or "no").

Here are a few tips regarding the use of questions:

Be open to all possible answers. Sometimes people ask questions but are willing to accept only a specific answer. When you ask a question, you have to be willing to consider whatever responses you get and not overreact.

Questions that start with "why" tend to make people feel defensive. You can replace why questions with phrasing that tends not to cause that reaction. For example, rather than asking, "Why are you late so often?" try, "What kinds of things are preventing you from arriving at work on time?" Notice the difference in feel?

Don't use questions to say things indirectly. For example, "Don't you think you should be more diligent in completing your work?" isn't really a legitimate question. It's a rhetorical question or your opinion dressed up as a question. It will be heard as "I want you to be more diligent in completing your work." Questions used to mask statements, opinions or requests can create mistrust.

Keep your questions simple. For example, a compound question is several questions in one and lacks focus. These questions are confusing and tend to result in low-quality responses. Here's an example: "What's causing you to be late on many Fridays and to leave early on Wednesdays?" That's two questions and you're not likely to get good answers to both. Separate the issues and make your questions simpler and more specific.

Here are a few sample questions to engage someone in conversation:

- ***What do you like best about your job? What's challenging?***
- ***What do you think are your strengths? Opportunities for development?***
- ***How can I help you optimize your performance?***
- ***Who can you collaborate with?***
- ***What haven't you thought of?***
- ***How can I support you?***

Asking for Feedback/Inquiring into the Other's Perspective

For conversations to be meaningful and to build a trusting relationship, you want to understand what is happening from the other's perspective. By inquiring into the other person's views you gain an opportunity to really listen for the benefit of your own learning. Supervisors may find it helpful to ask questions to encourage employees to self-evaluate:

- What's your perspective on this? Or, What are your thoughts?
- Overall, how do you feel your performance has been?
- Tell me about some of your successes this year.
- What areas do you feel you could most improve in?
- What would help you improve in those areas?
- What's getting in the way of your success?
- What do you need from me?

Your goal is to encourage the other person to share as much as possible from their point of view. Stay open and curious, listen and let them talk until they are finished. Resist the temptation to interject your opinion about their statements. Listen and learn all you can about the situation. You may be surprised, at times, to learn that how the other person views the subject is different than what you expected. By allowing them to share their thoughts, you will gain a keener insight as to how to approach your points.

More sample questions for inviting the other person's perspective:

Inviting developmental self-appraisal from the employee

- How might you improve _____?
- What might help increase your effectiveness at _____?
- When you consider your performance at _____, what opportunities do you see for your continued development?

When you want someone to talk about why they did something

- Help me understand _____.
- Please tell me more about your reasons for approaching it that way?

Listening

Listening is not passive, but is a skill to practice and strengthen. It's essential for creating rapport, trust and understanding during performance conversations. Imagine a conversation where the other person was distracted, checking their Blackberry or email, maybe missing the point of your message. How did you feel? Maybe those behaviours made you feel that they were too busy for you and that they didn't really care what you were saying. How would you rate the quality of that conversation? Listening well sends the message that this person and their performance are important to you. It also creates an environment where you're more likely to be listened to.

Remember the WAIT acronym

~ Why am I talking?

Active listening goes beyond just being in the room. It entails really focusing on what the other person is saying, looking beyond just the words being said and looking for the main ideas being expressed, as well as emotions and body language. Set the environment by avoiding interruptions and managing distractions. Show respectful eye contact, acknowledge what you've heard, and, rather than making assumptions, paraphrase or ask questions to check your understanding. Don't finish someone's sentences for them or use the time they are speaking to prepare your next comment. By remaining silent while the other person speaks, you will gain insight and understanding.

Understanding

For many, there is nothing more satisfying in a conversation, and in building relationships, than being seen and understood. Understanding engenders respect, respect encourages openness, and openness lowers one's defenses in a conversation.

Acknowledge:

- Their point of view although you may not agree with it completely.
- Their experiences and how they feel about them. Do not minimize people's emotions or feelings.
- What's important to them by showing respect to their ideas and plans, even if you think a plan has missing elements. Acknowledge it first, and then give your suggestions.

"The art of conversation is the art of hearing as well as of being heard."

~ WILLIAM HAZLITT, Selected Essays, 1778-1830

Recognition

People who feel recognized and appreciated are more productive and innovative. Recognition is an effective form of communication that reinforces and rewards the most important outcomes people create. You can refer to the MyPerformance Guide to Employee Recognition to learn more about the practice of meaningful and frequent recognition, and how it benefits individuals, teams and the organization.

Making Agreements

Before wrapping up your conversation, it's important to ensure mutual understanding and agreement on standards, expectations and timelines. How often have you had a conversation where you walked away not quite sure either of what you're supposed to do, or what the other person is planning to do? Finishing performance conversations clearly, with a quick summary and a common understanding of what's going to happen next, is essential for moving forward. This includes being mutually accountable and honouring whatever commitments have been made. Ideally, you will make mutual agreements; however, there will be situations when a supervisor will find it necessary to give specific directions.

In Conclusion

Remember, what's really important are the conversations, not just filling out a form at the end of a performance cycle. These conversations are directly impacted by the relationships between employees and supervisors. For conversations to be truly meaningful, people need to know they're supported. Trusted feedback leads to higher engagement, motivation and results and everyone benefits when honest conversations are the norm. Because these conversations are a shared responsibility, the common elements we have considered are relevant for both employees and supervisors.

RESOURCE ALERT

What does it mean to take a coaching approach to conversations?

This is a style of communication that enhances employees' engagement and supports improved performance. Communication is more two-way, involving less telling and directing, while increasing listening and drawing out with powerful questions. When using a coaching approach, the leader may still define the goals and tasks, but seeks input and suggestions on how to make those happen. This approach supports the development of staff in their job-related activities and ensures everyone has the skills and knowledge to get their work done.

Please read on for specific conversation scenarios for supervisors...

Conversation Scenarios for Supervisors

RESOURCE ALERTS

A coaching approach can help you support an employee in considering what meaningful and relevant work goals will be, based on the branch's objectives and their strengths.

To support supervisors in building this skill, consider the one-day in-person Coaching Approach to Conversations course offered by the Learning Centre.

SMART Goals:
- ***S pecific***
- ***M easurable***
- ***A ttainable***
- ***R ealistic and Relevant***
- ***T ime-based***

HARD Goals:
- ***H eartfelt***
- ***A nimated***
- ***R equired***
- ***D ifficult***

This section of the guide is designed to support supervisors in specific situations they may face.

Planning Conversations

This type of conversation allows for a common understanding of the way forward and a clarified focus for your employee's day to day work. A planning conversation involves setting goals for the year and agreeing on performance expectations and measures. Clear planning conversations provide a strong foundation for successful performance conversations throughout the year.

To go a step further, you can learn how to use MyPerformance to its fullest potential by clarifying the meaning of the vision and strategy with every employee. For more information on this you can refer to A MyPerformance Guide to Maximizing Results. And don't forget to consider the corporate values as well, which describe the qualities we value in our colleagues and in our organization, while providing us with a common language for describing how we do our various jobs.

Aspects of a successful planning conversation include the following:

- Choosing the right time and agreeing ahead on the purpose of the conversation so both of you can come prepared.
- Taking a coaching approach (see the resource alerts on how to access courses and resources).
- Agreeing on key work goals and ensuring they are aligned with organizational objectives (consider the principles of SMART and HARD goals).
- Considering what competencies and behaviours that need to be demonstrated to support those work goals.
- Discussing learning and development goals for the year.
- Offering supports as needed.
- Reviewing the MyPerformance rating scale and discussing how the employee can best contribute during the year and where on the scale they want to be at the end of the cycle.

What's really important here is the conversation. MyPerformance Profile is a tool to help you record the highlights of your conversation after you have it. For the process to be meaningful for both of you, you don't want filling out the boxes in the tool to be what drives the conversation. The conversation drives the tool; the tool doesn't drive the conversation.

End-of-Year Rating Conversations

In a review and rating conversation, you and your employee will together go back over the employee's results of the past year, linking back to the goals set in your initial planning conversation and all of the ongoing conversations you have had throughout the cycle. Discuss together how you each see the key work goal outcomes, the competencies displayed and any learning accomplishments. Focus on behaviours displayed rather than an assessment of the person. Aim for a shared understanding and discuss the final rating. If you're consistent about addressing issues and giving feedback throughout the year, your overall assessment of the employee's work shouldn't come as a surprise to them. If your planning conversation at the beginning of the year included specific measurables, then you begin with a shared understanding of desired behaviours and the rating conversation will link back to that discussion.

However, what if you and your employee don't agree on the rating, despite your best efforts? It's challenging when your rating of your employee's performance doesn't match with how they rate their own work. It's important to provide specific observable behaviours to support your rating. Then, really listen and seek to understand your employee's perspective on their performance and hear their examples. Look behind their self-rating to the reasons for it. What made them select this one? What accomplishments/actions of the last year are they seeing that lead to this rating? Acknowledge their perspective and really consider the information they are sharing.

Don't feel pressured to respond right away. Take the time you need to think the matter through and continue the conversation at a later date. This will ensure your final decision is a thoughtful one, based on all the information. It may be that you change your rating. Alternately, you might feel that your original rating is still appropriate. When you come back to have the final rating discussion, be prepared to explain what your employee needs to do to move up to the next level. What are the behaviours they need to display, and how can you support their growth?

A Performance Issue Needs Addressing

Addressing performance issues are some of the more awkward conversations for many of us. One way supervisors can err is by being so vague that an employee doesn't understand what changes are expected. Conversations can also be abrupt or come from a place of frustration/anger.

First, ask yourself if this is a good time to give feedback. Generally, it's best to have discussions about an issue closely following the behaviour. However, you could notice that either you or the other individual isn't in the right frame of mind for a productive conversation. If that's the case, find another moment, but don't postpone the conversation for long. Also consider your responsibilities as a supervisor and whether you may have contributed to the situation (for example, perhaps by giving unclear instructions or not providing necessary training). Be prepared to provide what's necessary if anything has been missed.

Addressing issues with an employee in the early stages includes the following:

- Being able to clearly state the issue.
- Basing comments on specific situations and being prepared to share an example or two (what was the actual behaviour noticed?).
- Explaining the impact of the behaviour (why this is important?).
- Asking the individual for their perspective (and following that by really listening).
- Involving the individual in determining next steps.

If you are working on building your skill in having these kinds of conversations, consider accessing the performance coaching services through MyHR.

Repetitive or complex performance issues may require additional steps. Please see the box on this page for resources in those situations.

RESOURCE ALERT

These principles for addressing issues can be applied in many situations.

However, complex or repetitive performance issues or one instance of a serious nature will require more personalized advice from an HR professional.

We encourage you to contact a Performance Coach through AskMyHR, selecting "My Team or Organization" in the first drop-down, and "Coaching & MyPerformance > MyPerformance Conversations" in the second drop-down.

RESOURCE ALERT

Information in the form of e-learning modules is also available. The modules cover a range of topics related to supporting employees who may have an illness or injury to stay at work, or return to work, as soon as possible after a period of illness.

They include such features as questions you can ask, questions you can't ask and how to communicate regularly with employees who are off work.

The purpose of the modules is to provide just- in-time information to help you manage situations on your own, or to direct you to specialists that can support both you and your employee.

Two truths:

1) Employees are responsible for their performance at work, including managing health issues that affect their performance;

AND

2) When an employee's performance is deteriorating or their attendance is being affected, supervisors have a responsibility to have a conversation about their observations and/or concerns so that they are supportive of the employee and able to meet operational requirements.

Both these statements are true, yet many managers are aware of potential sensitivities in these areas and don't feel confident in their ability to have a productive performance conversation when health factors may be involved. As supervisors, you're in the best position to observe that an employee may be struggling and you have a responsibility to act. This takes the form of communicating your observations and concerns to the employee and getting their input and perspective.

In these conversations, it's best not to assume that there is a health issue, but to provide an opportunity for your employee to let you know about anything that may be affecting his/her performance. Questions like, "Is everything alright?", and, "Is there anything I should know about factors that might be impacting your performance?" are less intrusive and less leading than questions specifically about health. This conversation should be about performance (or attendance) and possibly become about health, if the employee takes it there. It shouldn't begin as a health conversation.

In general, building solid respectful relationships with your employees is the foundation that helps these tricky conversations go more smoothly. Maintaining regular contact with employees (including when they are absent on sick leave) is also essential to the success of these situations and the early, sustained return to regular attendance and performance.

These scenarios cover general principles for just a few types of conversations. For more information, tools and resources please refer to the MyPerformance page on MyHR. You may also access specialized advice for specific situations through AskMyHR.

Wrapping Up

This guide was designed in recognition that the most important aspect of performance management is not the forms to be completed or the processes to follow, but the meaningful conversations we can have to promote job success, growth and development. Trusted feedback between supervisors and employees has one of the greatest impacts on employee engagement, motivation and results, and everyone benefits when honest conversations are the norm.

By understanding the importance of having regular performance conversations, and practicing the tips provided in this guide, you will be able to approach these conversations with confidence.

RESOURCE ALERT

Are you looking for support in recording your conversations into your and/or employee's MyPerformance Profile?

Click on the Profile Help button **Profile Help**

in your MyPerformance Profile where you will find helpful tools like profile samples, user guide, and FAQ's.

To get started, visit MyHR for a direct link to your MyPerformance Profile.

Where ideas work