

## TEN TIPS FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

In today's changing and challenging world, exceptional performance is the key to staying competitive. Being "good" is simply not good enough. For an organization to grow, employees must continually exceed previous performance and continually set higher standards for development and growth.

Effective performance appraisals provide a systematic way of evaluating and documenting employees' performance, recognizing accomplishments, appraising employees' potential for more responsibility, and identifying developmental areas. Well-written performance appraisals are one of a manager's most effective tools for managing by objective and for developing people.



Use these 10 tips for writing appraisals to significantly increase your team's effectiveness and perceived value within the organization:

**1. Increase your employees' comfort level with performance appraisals.** At the beginning of each review period, explain the appraisal process, rating system, and appraisal form to your employees. Agree on performance objectives and measurements for the upcoming review period.

Good objectives are clearly stated and SMART: specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and time-based. SMART objectives, written by the manager and employee together, help employees achieve team objectives.

**2. Take full advantage of performance appraisals.** Start thinking about appraisals as an opportunity to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of your team. Use them to:

- Clarify team and individual responsibilities and priorities so that everyone stays focused on activities that produce desired results.
- Summarize continuing on-the-job discussions to reinforce their significance.

- Document performance of the entire review period; recognize team and individual accomplishments and contributions.
- Measure performance based on mutually-understood, job-relevant criteria.
- Identify and suggest actions to improve results.
- Appraise each individual's potential for more responsibility.

**3. In addition to keeping your own records, encourage your employees to keep ongoing records:** updates to team and individual objectives when the team's objectives change, progress reports, commendations, descriptions of results achieved with special assignments, documentation of ongoing coaching discussions and of feedback from other business areas. You and your employees can keep hard or soft copies of the appraisal form and enter information during the year.

The more responsibility for and input into the appraisal process, the more ownership the employee will take for meeting objectives and identifying and improving development areas. Having the employee's input will let you know what the employee considers important (that is, how well you are communicating priorities) and will help ensure an accurate, fair appraisal.

**4. Use examples, facts, and accomplishments drawn from those ongoing records to present a factual, complete summary of employees' results.** Use specific wording rather than vague "boilerplate" wording to demonstrate your knowledge of and pride in your employees' contributions. Show employees that what they do does matter. Instead of "Howard is committed to quality and innovation," write "Howard's new Reporting Procedure helped us meet our team goal to reduce by 10% the turnaround time for hazardous materials reporting."

Specific wording keeps employees focused on objectives, proves ratings, and gives employees something concrete to "latch on to" to improve or maintain performance. Specific, accurate wording protects the organization in the unlikely event of legal proceedings.

**5. Use objective (factual) wording so that you concentrate on observed behaviors rather than on personality traits or "attitude."** Instead of "Laura is irresponsible and careless," or "Laura has a bad attitude," write "Dock accidents increased 10% in third quarter. After coaching, Laura implemented an Action Plan that helped keep the dock accident free during fourth quarter." Use objective wording to write credible performance appraisals that reinforce desired behaviors.

**6. Help employees achieve their full potential through recognition and encouragement. Use positive wording to cite accomplishments and constructive wording to suggest improvements.** Because tactful, positive wording increases employees' acceptance of your comments and suggestions, it motivates them to improve and to achieve goals. Be thorough and honest, but be careful to consider the effect of negatively worded comments on employees.

With the exception of low ratings, comment on only a few development areas—those that are critical to your team's success and those that you have discussed previously with the employee. Translate those areas into improvement suggestions. Build in a sense of continuity, linking what employees are already doing right to future successes. Instead of writing "Bob needs to take another computer course," write "Bob uses his Microsoft® Word training to produce quality, timely reports. The next step is Excel training so that he can present sales results in easy-to-access charts."

**7. Use benefit wording to reinforce desired behavior and motivate employees.** Remind your employees and your next level manager of the value and significance of your employees' actions. Write "Ann's sharing her strong collections expertise with team members has increased their understanding of collections issues, enabling them to better meet team goals."

**8. Use performance appraisals to summarize the year's performance and your discussions with your employees, not to introduce development areas for the first time.** Include **NO SURPRISES**. Feedback to an employee has its most significant impact immediately after a specific behavior has occurred. Always deal at once with unsatisfactory performance, especially serious conduct violations.

**9. When writing action plans for development needs:**

- **Keep an immediate or short-term focus.**
- **Link the plan and any training you recommend to team business objectives.**
- **Write clearly stated and task-related action plans.**
- **Make action plans SMART--specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and time-based.**

**10. Avoid picayune comments that trivialize the whole appraisal.** Answer the employee's questions, "How am I doing?" and "Where do I go from here?" Keep the performance appraisal focused on significant accomplishments and critical improvement areas that are tied to your team's business objectives.