

Effective Communication & Annual Reviews



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

Communication let me down
And I'm left here
Communication let me down
And I'm left here, I'm left here again!
"Communication," Spandau Ballet

Last week's Risk eNews, "Super Size It: Don't Skimp on Supporting Your New Hire," seemed to strike a chord with readers, based on the chorus of 'Amens' in my inbox. Although the piece was inspired by my daughter's dismal first experience working in retail, the tips in the article were fashioned by a former NRMC team member, Erin Gloeckner.

In their song "Communication," the 80s band Spandau Ballet describes how not hearing from someone can make us feel: 'let down,' and 'left-a-here-oh!' Hearing that song reminds me about one of the most common complaints from otherwise motivated nonprofit team members: **poor communication**. At many nonprofits, the annual performance review is the culmination of communication between you and your supervisor. In "The Performance Management Revolution," featured in the October 2016 issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, authors Peter Cappelli and Anna Tavis write that despite several persistent flaws with the traditional annual performance review, many organizations continue to be reluctant to abandon or completely revamp their dated, time-consuming and unproductive process. Some of the communications-related flaws with annual reviews include:

- **Lateness** - They are untimely and focus too heavily on past performance. Many performance reviews include commentary on events, successes, or even missteps that occurred months ago and can no longer be corrected to impact the relevant project.
- **Cowardice** - According to Cappelli and Tavis, "...waiting until the end of the year to flag struggling employees allows failure to go on for too long without intervention." We know that many individuals are uncomfortable with conflict and thus, many supervisors may be willing to put off performance reviews (or conduct poor, ineffective reviews) due to their own cowardice.
- **Irrelevance** - They 'hold people accountable for past behavior at the expense of improving current performance.' Does it really make sense to demote an employee for a failure from six months ago? This approach likely bears great consequences for your organization's current and future performance, including the employee's disengagement and dissatisfaction, and the failure of the organization to identify and further develop the employee's strengths-which could prove useful in upcoming projects.
- **Bias** - They inherently exhibit the 'attribution error'-the tendency to attribute the performance of others to their character and competence, rather than their circumstances, including the availability of opportunities to grow and learn, the quality of management, and other conditions beyond an employee's

control. Along with attribution error, other biases might poke their nasty heads up during performance reviews. For example, if a manager favors a certain employee, the manager might be more likely to give the employee a glowing review that casts others in his shadow, even if there is no real discrepancy in performance.

Make Effective Communication the Rhythm Section of Performance Management

Songs can't make you swing your hips without rhythm, just as performance reviews can't help your employees without effective communication. Keep your team smiling, dancing, and working smart by boosting your communication prowess with these tips.

- **Use 2 Questions to Keep It Simple:** Create a performance management system based on conversations between supervisors and supervisees. Focus those conversations on two essential questions: "What am I doing that I should keep doing?" and "What am I doing that I should change?"
- **Talk About It Today:** Resolve to have timely conversations with your direct reports, such as when a project has wrapped, or when challenges arise during a project. Managers need the ability to 'spot check' and identify areas for improvement during projects, just as employees want to correct their ineffective behaviors before they become habits. Nobody wants to perform badly, but bad performance will stick if it's not addressed as soon as possible..
- **Vary the Format:** With so much going wrong with the annual performance review, consider varying the format or using multiple channels to provide feedback to your direct reports. Sometimes a mix of annual reviews and casual, ongoing coaching work well together. The annual review provides more formal, structured direction while ad-hoc feedback offers employees opportunities to improve their performance in manageable bites, over the course of the month or year. Because the annual review often elicits anxiety--on behalf of both employees and managers--casual, on-the-spot feedback might be welcomed by both parties.
- **Agree on an Action Plan:** The point of providing feedback is to inspire your employees to change their behaviors or attitudes; but oftentimes, feedback does not result in the change that a manager wishes to see. This might indicate that the manager and the employee got different messages from the conversation, or perhaps the employee didn't clearly understand the manager's directive. Both of you must understand and agree on: the behavior that must change, the timeline in which the change is expected to happen, and the end goal or the new behavior that the employee should demonstrate. I've had experiences at the Center where I gave an employee oodles of feedback about a specific pain-point, yet the employee's behavior didn't change. I later found out that she simply didn't recognize that the feedback was a priority, and that in her eyes, I never provided a clear directive for her to follow. An action plan is critical to help avoid the myriad communication snares that can occur during a simple interaction.
- **Check-in and Take a Chance:** Behavior change is sometimes challenging and can take time. If you provide timely, clear feedback and agree on a pathway for the employee to improve, then a little time might be the only other ingredient needed to bake in the new behavior. Give the employee a chance--or a few chances--to demonstrate improved performance over time. Consider conducting informal check-ins to encourage the employee and identify any environmental barriers to improved performance (e.g., insufficient training).
- **Listen More:** We all know communication is a two-way street. Feedback tends to go from one party to another, but maybe that's why it's often ineffective. As a manager, empower your direct reports to communicate back to you, and resolve to listen fully when they do. When you offer feedback, your employees might communicate with body language as well as verbally. By sensing and clarifying how your employees react to feedback, you can begin to offer it in a way that your employees will remain receptive to. A manager who listens will garner greater respect and support from her direct reports.

The work of your team is vital to the mission of your organization, and effective communication and feedback loops are key to the success of a high-performing team. Resolve to never let your team members feel abandoned by reflecting on how you communicate and coach. Please share your own communication tips by replying to me at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org. And remember that no matter the format or content of your feedback, your employees look to you for positive encouragement and affirmation. Resolve to always shine a light on the good things your employees bring to your team. "Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless." - Mother Teresa

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your feedback about this article at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.