

## Tone it down

*Use performance appraisal to help manager brush up interpersonal skills*

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, *For Small Business Times*

**Question: I am still trying to catch up with all of my performance appraisals from the fourth quarter of last year. I never look forward to doing these. There is one employee in particular that I am really struggling with. He is very technically gifted. He is extremely bright and very sharp verbally. He talks over people's heads and seems to enjoy using jargon to confuse them. Over the course of the past year, I've heard from a number of his co-workers that he is unresponsive to their requests. While he is a very gifted producer, he has also been know to make a mistake or two, normally because he's gone too fast and overlooked some details. The real key for his ongoing improvement is that he needs to work on his interpersonal skills. How do I get that point across? How do you get someone with an IQ that's off the charts to recognize that he needs to tone it down so that he can form better working relationships?**

**Answer:** Is there a more universally disdained managerial task than performance appraisals? I don't know of one.

There are many reasons why performance appraisals are loathed. The rating system may be cumbersome. The rating categories may not be relevant to the position. There may be a vague or unclear link between performance appraisal and salary adjustments. If goal setting is part of the process, it may not be tracked beyond the performance appraisal. In short, performance appraisal is often viewed as a waste of time.

Yet, a question like the one you raise shows why performance appraisal and performance management are very important tasks for a manager to undertake. I find your question to be an interesting one because I field this kind of inquiry with some degree of frequency. In essence, you are saying that this employee seems to be doing all right in terms of achieving the ends that are desired (e.g., the tasks, his technical know-how, etc.). At the same time, you are expressing concern about the process that he uses and particularly the interpersonal implications of his work style (e.g., the "means").

Perhaps you're wondering if you can even hold employees accountable for the way they interact and communicate with their colleagues. Of course you can. How can you afford not to? Sooner or later this employee is going to alienate someone other than a colleague. What happens when his condescending behavior is directed toward a customer? A superior (i.e., you, the company president, etc.)? What will be the consequences then?

You need to use the performance appraisal process to document what is not working at the present time with regard to his interpersonal presentation. Draw upon illustrative examples to provide him with evidence in support of your impressions. If you can objectify the comments from his co-workers that you mention in your question, that will also be potentially eye opening for him. Point out the common perspectives that attach to his interpersonal posture. You need to get him to see that it is not the other employees that have a

problem-he does.

My experience tells me that someone like the employee you describe may not be quick to accept your feedback. After all, he's sharp, has all of the answers, etc. It's always the other guy's problem, never his. Well, guess what? That's not true. He has a role in all of this, too. In fact, it's the primary one. He must take ownership, and your feedback is the first step in that direction: you're helping become aware of how others see him.

So it will be important for him to look inward. Is his self-assessment consistent with what you have told him? Chances are it isn't. Nevertheless, he has to be told that his social skills need to be brought into better alignment with his technical skills.

For this to happen, it will be most important to use the appraisal to outline and target an action plan that includes specific actions/steps. It will be important to be very pointed here.

Based on your impressions and the information you have gathered from others, identify a few specific behaviors for him to work on (e.g., slowing down in his communication exchanges, using inquiry to verify that his message has been received the way he intended it, making more active use of active listening, etc.).

Outline what you want him to do and the criteria that you will use to monitor his progress.

It is important that you indicate what your role will be in all of this. This is a real opportunity for you to help him rise to another level. Using mentoring and coaching with him will help him along those lines. It will help you to stay "in the loop" and

ensure that you talk about his progress on a regular basis, not just at the next performance appraisal next December. Execution on his part and follow-up on your part will be the critical determinants in how far he grows.

By the way, this kind of situation is ideal for using a 360-degree survey. Feedback from multiple sources (e.g., self, boss, employee, peer, customer, etc.) can help him to see how he is doing. It also may be more persuasive because of the objective presentation. Being technically focused, he may need "hard data" to convince him.

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has documented that more than 80% of so-called "rising star" managers have failed because of "interpersonal flaws." Your employee better get a handle on his interpersonal presentation before he turns into one of CCL's statistics. Use the performance appraisal process and subsequent performance management to get him back on-track.



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