The Grading System of the Real World

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At the beginning of each semester, the instructor hands out a syllabus packet which often contains a course outline or schedule and an explanation of the grading policy. The work world has grading systems too, and you need to know about them in advance so you can prepare for Performance Reviews. Performance reviews can have an immense impact on your future akin to the impact a final exam has on a semester. Janet Riley, a member of the Systers mailing list, explains, "Performance reviews have two purposes. They have a management purpose, which is for you and your manager to figure out what you're doing day-to-day and where you should go next. They also have a financial purpose, which is to determine your raise and (knock on wood) determine who to keep during layoffs" [**4**]

A systems administrator conveys her story:

> In school, I always got straight A's, pretty much no matter what. I got kind of used to being top of the class. When I had my first performance review on a job, much to my surprise, I didn't get "excellent" (the top ranking) in everything even though I did my job better than the other people in my position. I remember being really upset about that.
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> My boss said something like, "Yes, you are doing an excellent job, but there's always room for improvement. Plus, I'm judging your performance against what I think you are capable of, and not on a curve against your fellow employees." He made it clear that believing there was room for improvement was more of an indication of his confidence in my ability to excel, rather than saying that I wasn't up to snuff, but it was quite a shocker that there was really no way to get "straight A's" on the job.

> *In school, there's a sort of minimum standard you have to reach to get an A in the class. Once you reach that standard, there's no reason to try to reach above it, since A is the highest you can get. On the job, however, there are always more things to learn and more ways to improve your skills, and there's often no set standard for getting the highest "score": you just have to do your best and try to excel as much as possible. Sometimes, I'd prefer to go back to the school environment where it's more of "Do X, Y, and Z and you'll get an A." Life was a lot simpler then. On the other hand, I learn more in a year on the job than I did in any two years of school, so I guess that's the payoff [**1**].*

If a copy of a blank performance review is not a part of your orientation packet at a new job, definitely ask for one. Just as you plan a school semester to make sure you have time for difficult tasks, make a note of performance areas where you will have to expend extra energy.

It is important to understand how performance reviews are handled at the company, including:

- how frequently they're conducted
- how frequently you can expect a formal written review
- whether performance review and salary review occur at the same time
- what information your boss expects from you at review time
- whether reviews occur on the hiring anniversary date or at specific times during the calendar year
- and when you're first eligible for a review.

A good time to learn this information is at your first "getting to know you" meeting with your boss (like when your boss drops by on your first day of work to make sure everything's OK, and they have finished explaining where the staff meetings, office supplies, and best lunch restaurant are). To avoid appearing greedy, don't focus on salary expectations [**2**].

Preparing for a Review

A performance review must be prepared for, but there shouldn't be any panic involved. A mid-level business applications design manager at Xerox Corporation says, "A manager should never deliver an appraisal that is a surprise to the employee. If s/he

does that, it is a sign of their failure as a manager. So you should not have to 'brace yourself' for a formal review" [8].

Determine whether a manager is likely to stick to any objectives established before-hand. If so, make sure your work supports those objectives, or get a formal change of objectives to represent your actual work [8].

Unlike school, where your professor keeps track of homework and exam grades, your manager may not keep written records of your accomplishments. In fact, if you're on a project your manager doesn't think about every day, they may not even know what you've been up to! It's up to you to document your accomplishments [2]. Take notes throughout the year so you won't forget all those activities and accomplishments that document your growth (note these categories are distinct). Document specific examples of your work. Also, look for patterns that tie activities together. Avoid 'big' words that sound good but fail to specify detail. For example: "Worked on achieving world peace" is bad. A better way to phrase this would be, "Worked with direct reports to agree on approaches to resolving conflicts. Before this effort, I spent about 20 hours per week mediating disagreements within my group. Three months after this effort, I found I was spending only 5 hours per week on this activity" [8].

Reframe your work into a context that matters to the corporation. Ask yourself, "What business benefit does the company get from my work?" and be prepared to explain the answer. Remember, results matter more than good intentions and staying busy. Provide context so results can be interpreted properly (i.e., Is 'produced 200 lines of code' good or bad? why?) [8]. Riley gives another example: 'Wrote namespace code for project XYZ' should instead be phrased as 'Adapted project XYZ, our user registration system, to allow us to more quickly integrate the user bases of the companies we acquire, in a way that keeps business logic intact' [4].

It's also important that your manager hear about your accomplishments from the other people you work with. At review time, either your manager or you should ask the people on your project to send feedback to the manager. And don't wait until review time. If someone praises you for a job well done, let your boss know. If they send you email, forward it to your boss. If they thank you verbally, ask them to let your boss know (written is better than verbal!). Depending on the person, you can be serious ("Thanks, Chris, that's really nice of you. Mind telling Dale about it?") or light, ("Thanks, Chris. And it'll do me a lot more good if you tell Dale!") [2].

A performance review is not something you can "cram" for. Solid performance day-after-day-after-day is important. That includes things like regular attendance during the workday, appropriate participation on projects, delivering good work products on time, and being a team player. Supervisors do notice when people "shape up" just before review time, and they usually fare worse than those who were consistent throughout the year, and better than those who do nothing. Nothing beats consistently doing your job well, continuous improvement in your performance, and being interested in the work you do and the company you do it for. It also helps to be presentable (that is, bathe regularly and dress appropriately). [**6**].

Taking Due Credit

Judith Szepesi, an Intellectual Property lawyer, says, "The biggest piece of advice is when they ask how you think you did, do NOT put yourself down. I review a small group of people and I see this especially among women and first-generation Asian immigrants. For example, I will say, 'I think you did very well on project X' and the response will be 'No, I did not do so well. I couldn't have done it alone…' Take credit for your work. In class, you are graded and no one asks how you think you did. In the real world, people will ask for self-evaluation. Take up for yourself, and make sure people see the good things you do. And learn to take a compliment" [**7**].

Riley concurs, "Banish words like 'helped' and 'assisted,' because they weaken the point. You don't give someone a raise for being helpful. This is not stealing credit or being a bad team player. It's okay to sound off about your contributions. It was uncomfortable at first to toot my own horn. However, I see this as speaking in a way that someone outside the tech group will understand. You need to help your manager justify your raise, and at layoff time you need people to understand what you contribute to the company" [**4**].

After the Review

If you have a less than favorable performance review, here are some tips on how to cope:

- One technique in dealing with criticism is to ask, "How can I turn this weakness into a strength?" Acknowledging that you may have a weakness, and indicating your willingness to address the weakness, is a way to enlist the aid of your boss

in your career growth [5].

- Another technique is to ask for explicit examples of behavior. Sometimes bosses speak in generalities when discussing positive and negative behaviors. When this happens, ask for examples. For example, "That's very interesting, and I'd like to understand better what you mean. Could you please give me some examples of what you're talking about, so I could learn from the examples." This helps clarify any ambiguity and also if a boss can't provide any examples, it can indicate larger problems [5].

- Remember that other people will review the record of your performance review and form opinions about you. Take your time -- that is, read it over carefully (and privately) before agreeing with it and/or signing it. Ask for a few private minutes to digest the words if you have to -- there is no good reason for this request to be denied. If you feel a different phrasing would be more accurate, say something -- supervisors are usually struggling with how to say the right thing and appreciate suggestions (as long as they agree with the meaning). If you do not understand what something means, ask and then request a substitution of the explanation for the words you did not understand -- if the explanation was clearer [6].

- Sometimes you have to stand up for yourself. If the performance review understates your contribution and value and you end up with a rating lower than you feel is appropriate -- speak up! This is your career and it affects your salary and opportunities. Be ready to listen while more detail is provided -- and be willing to change your mind if you are satisfied (not necessarily happy) with the answer (and be willing to make changes in your performance and behavior to correct deficiencies). Be willing to "not sign" a performance review if pressured but not given a satisfactory answer. If there is a section for employee comment, use it wisely [6].

Example Review Forms

Here are a couple of different performance evaluation forms that I've collected over the years.

Example One -- Industry

Instructions: Carefully evaluate employee's work performance in relation to current job requirements. The performance ratings will be totaled and averaged for an overall performance score. Be sure to include supportive details or comments.

Definition of performance ratings:

1. Exceptional. Functions in an outstanding manner. Far exceeds goals in all major job responsibilities.
2. Exceeds standards. Performs job in superior fashion. Meets or exceeds most major goals and functions well in all ranges of the job responsibilities.
3. Meets standards. Performance meets the job standards and is what is expected of a qualified employee performing the total responsibilities of the job.
4. Fair. Performs at less than adequate level in some respects. Is able to meet major goals in some areas, but does not function fully in all ranges or job responsibility.
5. Unsatisfactory. Job performance is less than adequate in all respects. Employee should be terminated if improved performance is not demonstrated in a prescribed period.

Performance Rating Areas (Include supportive detail or comments):

1. Quality: The extent to which an employee's work is accurate, thorough and neat.
2. Productivity: The extent to which an employee produces a significant volume of work efficiently in a specified period of time.
3. Job Knowledge: The extent to which an employee possesses the practical/ technical knowledge required on the job.
4. Reliability: The extent to which an employee can be relied upon regarding task completion and follow-up. In addition, overall attendance and punctuality.
5. Independence: The extent to which an employee performs work with little or no supervision.
6. Initiative: The extent to which an employee seeks out new assignments and assumes additional duties when necessary.
7. Adherence to Policy: The extent to which an employee's conduct demonstrates compliance with company policies.
8. Judgment: The extent to which an employee demonstrates proper judgment in decision-making skills and keeping management appraised when necessary.

Example Two -- Industry

Assessment definitions:

1. No skill in this area. Learning the skill is critical to current or future position.
2. Little skill in this are; skill is necessary for success and growth. Focus on skill basics.
3. Skill basics are present but inconsistent; consistency is crucial to success and growth.
4. Skill in this area is adequate. Focus efforts on developing skill.
5. Skill level adds value to performance. Focus on further development for success.
6. Skill level is obvious in everyday work. Consistent application and attention to developing this skill is evident.
7. Level of skill helps maintain as leader in industry. Role model for others and teacher of others.

Items:

1. Customer Focus: Productively developing customer relationships by making efforts to listen to and understand the customer (internal and external); anticipating and providing solutions to customers' needs; giving high priority to customer satisfaction.
2. Initiative: Making active attempts to influence events to achieve goals; self-starting rather than accepting passively; taking action goals beyond what is required; being proactive.
3. Technical/Professional Knowledge: Having achieved a satisfactory level of technical and professional skills/knowledge in job-related areas; keeping abreast of current developments and trends in area of expertise.
4. Coaching: Facilitating the development of others' knowledge and skills; providing timely feedback and guidance to help them reach goals.
5. Individual Leadership/Influencing: Using appropriate interpersonal styles and methods to inspire and guide individuals (direct reports, peers, and superiors) toward goal achievement; modifying behavior to accommodate tasks, situations, and individuals involved.
6. Judgment/Problem Solving: Committing to action after developing alternative courses of action that are based on logical assumptions and factual information and that take into consideration resources, constraints, customer priorities, and organizational values.
7. Analysis/Problem Assessment: Securing relevant information and identifying key issues and relationships from a base of information; relating and comparing data from different sources; identifying cause-effect relationships; alerting Project

Leader of potential problems.

8. Quality Orientation/Attention to Detail: Accomplishing tasks through concern for all areas involved; showing concern for all aspects of the job; accurately checking processes and tasks; maintaining watchfulness.
9. Planning and Organizing/Work Management: Establish course of action for self and/or others to accomplish a specific goal; set and track meaningful milestones; plan proper assignment of personnel and appropriate allocation of resources.
10. Tolerance for Stress: Maintaining stable performance under pressure and/or opposition; relieving stress in an acceptable manner.
11. Teamwork/Collaboration: Working effectively with team/work group or those outside formal line of authority to accomplish organizational goals; taking actions that respect the needs and contributions of others; contributing to and accepting the consensus; subordinating own objectives to the objectives of the organization or team.
12. Communications skills: Expressing ideas clearly and effectively, verbally, and in documents that have organization, structure, grammar, language, and terminology adjusted to the characteristics and needs of the audience.
13. Developing Organizational Talent: Developing direct reports' skills and competencies by planning effective development activities related to current and future jobs.
14. Delegation of Authority and Responsibility: Allocating decision making authority and task responsibilities to appropriate direct reports; utilizing direct reports' time, skills, and potential effectively.

Example Three -- Academic Faculty

The students fill in a scantron form with a five-point scale -- Strongly Disagree; Disagree; Neither Agree nor Disagree; Agree; Strongly Agree. Rating items include [**3**]:

1. The instructor makes the material interesting and holds the attention of the class.
2. The instructor makes the material relevant to my course of study.
3. The instructor communicates clearly.
4. The instructor's presentations are well organized.
5. The instructor knows if the course content is being understood.
6. The instructor is reasonable accessible to students out of class.
7. I have had to work hard in this course.
8. I have become more competent in this area because of this instructor.

9. Grading and evaluation procedures by the instructor seem fair and objective.
10. If I take another course in this subject, I would like to have this instructor.

Giving Feedback to Management

During performance reviews, some organizations will ask you to set performance and development goals for the next year. In some cases you may even get to provide feedback to management. If you get to provide input, be meticulous about grammar and spelling, and write your contribution thoroughly and on time [8]. Below is an example of a form requesting feedback to the company.

Record any comments about the following areas:

1. Task Definition: During this review period, did you receive adequate definition of the tasks and duties you were assigned to complete? Do you have any recommendations that would help improve the level of definition you receive?
2. Team Leadership: How would you describe the leadership that you receive from your direct supervisor, as well as from your project leader/manager?
3. Career Guidance: Have you received career guidance during this past review period? Who did you receive it from? Have you found this information helpful? How could it have been more helpful to you?
4. Career Goals: During the past review period, have you had an opportunity to work toward your career goals, as defined in your last review (or as stated during your interview)? List areas you have had a chance to enhance, and goals you have attained. Is there a particular goal that you were not able to work towards this review period? If so, explain why this occurred.
5. Training: What skills have you had an opportunity to enhance, through training, during this review period?
6. Work Environment/Culture: What is your assessment of the office setting, support functions, company benefits, and overall culture?

Conclusion

Now that you've seen a few samples, find out what the performance review paperwork is like at your organization before it catches you by surprise. Good reviews are a vital part of getting promoted!

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