# How to conduct a successful management interview

By Terry Barker

Part three of the Bosstalk series on managing in the new millennium.

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the third and final part of my book series on communication for people in leadership roles, How to Conduct a Management Interview. In this book we’ll focus on something which is deceptively simple, but incredibly important, and often overlooked or given little importance.

There are actually many kinds of interviews, but this is the kind we'll deal with here. So we're not going to talk about the salesperson-prospect, doctor-patient, or lawyer-client interactions, which have special purposes and unique rules of their own.

Some types of management interviews are:

1. Selection (hiring, or choosing an employee for a task)

2.Discipline

3.Performance evaluation.

4.Counselling

5.Information exchange

6. “Maintenance”, or keeping the lines of communic­­ation open.

This part of Boss Talk deals with the basic principles and strategies which apply to all management interviews.

**PRINCIPLES**

There are three major principles which seem to apply to all management interviews: Controlling power, building rapport, and questioning. Let's deal with them one at a time.

**CONTROLLING POWER**

In most interviews between boss and subordinate, the boss holds the balance of power. It's the boss who can annotate the file, recommend transfers (or not), allocate or delegate interesting or unpleasant work, or make changes in the work environment. So the average interviewee enters into the transaction with at least some resistance, prudent caution, or even fear. They might want to tell you about the problem they're having with that salacious foreperson but they don't know how you might take it. What will you do if they tell you the truth? Many employees opt to live with their problems rather than risk telling you things they fear you don't want to know. If you want the interview to be anything more than an exchange of superficialities, you have to do some things to set people at ease so they can develop some trust in you.

As a rule of thumb:

*If you start an interview on a low power level, you get more options.*

(“Power”, in the sense we use it here, means “how you come across to others.” High power is overwhelming, dominant, perhaps even threatening. Low power is quiet, open, accepting, and non-judgmental.) If you start with low power you can always pull those sergeant's stripes out of your pocket and stick them on your arm later on: but if you start at the top of your voice, it's pretty hard for others to see you as someone they can confide in.

**A. POWER REDUCTION**

Here are six areas in which you can reduce your initial power impact on an interviewee:

1. Room symbolism

2. Body language

3. Voice

4. Initial topics

5. Opening questions

6. Feedback loops.

**Room Symbolism**

When subordinates enter your office, what do they see? Look around you. Try to see your office as a new employee might see it. How many framed diplomas are there? Any shots of you and the mayor having a friendly pow-wow? How about snaps of your country estate, and your Arabian horses, and your children graduating from college? What's on your desk? What kind of rug do you have?

People pick up all these power signs subliminally. We don't con­sciously take inventory when entering an office, but somewhere deep down in the most ancient part of our mind an alarm bell goes off: “This one is dangerous,” it says. “This one has power. This one can toss me out of the tribe or serve me up for dinner.”

The desk is the most important symbol of power because it is a virtual extension of your Personal space.

If you put other people across from you, you have created a barrier. They can't even put their elbows on the desk surface without appearing confrontational, as though they were inviting you to an arm wrestle. A better location is “kitty-corner”, with your chairs forming a right angle.

Sitting this way, you can chat a lot more easily. Interviewees can now put their elbows on the desk, which is a kind of touching, without intruding on your personal space. It's a physical contact which doesn't threaten either party.

The advantage of this set-up is that you haven't abdicated your power seat. When you go into a neutral room, such as the cafeteria, you are on a much more equal footing with the other person. That's fine, so long as you don't need to pull rank. If you should happen to need those sergeant's stripes, they come out of the pocket a lot easier if you're sit­ting in your own chair behind your own desk in your own office. All it takes is a quick swivel, a change of eye-contact and voice quality, and aiming a weapon, such as a pen.

Some bosses are lucky enough to have a coffee table in the office. That gives you another option. If you want to develop an easy informality with the other person, use the coffee table.

**B. BODY LANGUAGE**

An open posture tends to reduce tension. If you fold your arms across your chest, you look like you're about to arrest someone. If you point pens like guns, people feel nervous. If you lean forward ag­gressively when other people are telling you something intimate, they will stop and change the subject.

Leaning back and putting your elbow on the desk is usually understood as meaning that you are relaxed and interested. The other person can mimic your posture in safety, thus building body language rapport. Or you could tilt your body and head to one side and fold your hands in your lap, or lean forward with both hands loosely clasped on the desk.

If you don't know them well, it's probably unwise to physically touch interviewees except to shake hands. Introduction norms are changing so rapidly these days that it's hard to advise as to whether you should use first names, but here's a possible model for the intimacy you hope to reach:

Good morning. You're Ellen Martin? I'm Bill Brown, Chief of Personnel. Would you like a cup of coffee?

**C. VOICE**

How loud or soft are you, really? Both extremes are intimidating to an interviewee — the loud blustery sergeant-major voice, and the deadly whisper of the smiling executioner.

And how's your interest level? A flat and boring voice is a cross to bear for subordinates. You can get control over the variety of pace, pitch, volume and colour by this exercise:

Read a feature story from your daily newspaper into a tape re­corder. Pretend that you are the hype-est jock on AM radio, and you're going to punch every line for all it's worth. Then play it back and see how well you have succeeded. Do this every night after dinner for two weeks.

The reason for the exercise is that when we speak, we hear not only the voice that our listeners hear, but also all the harmonics that are cre­ated in our heads. Sound reverberates in our sinuses and other cavities, and resonates in our head bones. What we hear when we speak is much richer and warmer than what our hearers do. The purpose of the exer­cise is for you to marry up the inner voice with the outer voice — so that what you hear inside is what they hear outside. To do that you need feedback, which the reading of the news story into a tape recorder will give you.

**INITIAL TOPICS**

*Why did Shakespeare start his plays with a throw-away first page?*

Because he knew that it takes an audience a minute or two to get used to the sound of the actors' voices. The same reasoning applies to an interview. If the interviewee is a stranger, or if you haven't talked together yet today, it's a good idea to engage in a little small talk before getting on with the topic at hand.

If you call Mary Smith or Brian Jones in for an interview, they will feel some initial nervousness. What's the boss want me for? Has she found out about my sessions in the broom closet with Leslie? Does he know about my overspending on the ABC contract? The purpose of small talk is to relax the other person so that you can start communicating.

Some useful phrases for getting the show on the road are:

Have you had your morning coffee yet?

How was traffic this morning?

Any trouble finding your way here?” (To an applicant).

The weather certainly is — , isn't it?

Don't skip the small talk on the grounds that it's “phony” or a “waste of time”. It's one of those rituals that allow people to live and work together, like the Good-morning-how-are-you which lets people know your mood today. If you don't do it, you upset people. They wonder what's the matter, and what they've done to make you unsociable.

**OPENING QUESTIONS**

Opening questions should be safe, non-threatening, and as open-ended as possible. The best ones are those which allow interviewees to choose their own topics:

*How are things going?*

*What's on your mind today?*

You can ask a work question if you know it's a safe one. For instance, if the interviewee has been working on a shift-rearrangement, and you know that it's going well, you can say, “How's that night shift program working out?” The other person can start the dialogue with a success story (which permits good bridge-building) rather than a failure (which promotes secrecy and avoidance of blame).

**FEEDBACK LOOPS**

The most encouraging thing you can do for interviewees is to let them know you are listening empathetically. To do this, you need to employ:

A. Listening silence

B. Encouraging sounds

C. Mirroring

D. Summarizing

Let's examine these four ideas a little more closely.

A. Listening Silence (“Creative listening”) is an interactive proc­ess. Don't just sit there like a dummy, gazing into space: even if you hear every word, that impassive face of yours is pretty discouraging for interviewees! You must look interested, and the most powerful way of showing interest is to look at them. Engage them in animated eye-contact.

B. Encouraging Sounds are the “uh-huh's” and “oh yeah's” that tell peo­ple that you're listening. They are usually accompanied by head nods. If both parties are harmonizing, the heads will nod together.

C. Mirroring means giving back the same words the other person has used. If the other person says, “I really hate this work,” and you say, “You really hate this work, do you?” it tells the other person two things: You listened closely enough so that you can repeat what was said; and you cared enough to check the accuracy of your per­ception. That is, the other person learns that you listen and you care.

D. Summarizing is a tool you use from time to time. Occasionally you will say, “Okay, now, this is what we've said so far....” This technique is very stimulating for the interviewee, and acts as an inducement to continue.

The use of these tools depends on your purpose. You might want to frighten or cow the interviewee into submission. In that case, a direct reverse of the above techniques would work. But if you are to conduct a management interview in which you and the subordinate can actually discuss and solve problems, or trade ideas in an adult manner, then you need to be concerned with reducing your power level.

Power reduction doesn't just happen, though. You have to plan it. Don't just “start the interview and hope it comes out okay”. That's not fair to you or the interviewee. Think about it beforehand. Arrange the chairs correctly. Reduce some of your power symbolism. Think about what questions you will ask. Arrange your body language so it's non-threatening. Practice your head-nods and your “Uh-huh's”. And pay attention to the interviewee!

**BUILDING RAPPORT**

A good interview has a natural rhythm. It begins with a concern for what the interviewee is saying, helps them develop ideas and explore them from various angles, and then moves smoothly on to the next topic.

During the body of the interview, you have to develop and maintain open communication. There are four skills to be mastered:

A. Offer feedback

B. Ask developmental questions

C. Diverge

D. Change.

A. Offer feedback. In addition to the mirroring and summarizing skills referred to in the section on “Controlling Power” you need lots of paraphrasing to keep the flow moving. “Paraphrasing” means feeding back the content of what you un­der­stand others to have said, plus the emotional freight. When you par­a­phrase you are checking the accuracy of your perception and at the same time letting people know that you are listening on both information and emotion levels.

*Examples:*

There's no challenge in this job for me anymore.

You're bored and fed up with the job, is that right?

B. Ask developmental questions. Since the purpose of the interview is to get other people talking, it's up to you to ask the right sort of questions to help them do so.

One such standard question (which has become a catch-phrase) is “Tell me about it”. In its original incarnation it meant just what it said, but it's often used as sarcasm today. So if you do use it, watch your intonation!

The idea of developmental questions is to get other people to keep talking, once they've started.

*For instance:*

There's no challenge in this job for me anymore.

What's wrong with the job? Tell me.

Watch for “flags” — expressions which are out of the ordinary, or said with odd looks, or contradictions repeated several times. A “flag” is a method used to get YOU to ask THEM about sensitive issues which they can't bring themselves to initiate. Let's say that you are discussing the night shift and the other person keeps heaving sighs and saying, “It sure causes home problems, though.” You weren't asking about a home problem, but if they mention it a few times it's a clue that they would like to discuss it with you but lack the nerve to bring it up. If you detect a flag, and if you decide to follow it up, try mirroring it: “You're having trouble at home?” Your encouragement may help them talk about it.

C. Diverge. Most of the interview is conducted in the first two modes above (offering feedback and asking developmental questions) but it's also useful to ask diverging questions. It means you look at the problem from a new angle or perspective.

There's no challenge in my job.

I'm bored to tears.

I've done it all so many times I've got it all aced.

*Have you ever had this happen to you before?*

A skilled interviewer can be of inestimable value to employees by helping them see things in a new way.

D. Change topic. When you've asked all the questions you can think of, and the inter­viewee doesn't seem to have anything more to say about the topic, it's time to move on. The interviewer can do this more easily than the in­terviewee, who may feel inhibited.

But before you do, ask this key question:

*“Is there anything else you'd like to say or ask about this?”*

Most of the time they say no, in which case you just move on to the new subject. But every once in a while (often enough to make this technique worthwhile), they'll say, “As a matter of fact, there IS one other thing....”

What's been happening is that they've been unconsciously summing you up to determine whether or not you can be trusted with sensitive stuff. Your asking if there's anything else they'd like to say has given them an opportunity to bring it up.

There is a natural rhythm to all this:

A good interviewer spends most of the interview time asking ques­tions, giving feedback, and listening. If you find that you are talking more than 20% of the time, or indulging in long moralistic lectures — then you aren't interviewing.

If you talk 20% and listen 80%, it's an interview.

If you talk 50% and listen 50%, it's a discussion.

If you talk 80% and listen only 20%, it's a lecture.

If both of you talk 80% and don't listen at all, it's an argument!

**QUESTIONING**

Good questioning technique is a lot like good camera work. You shift your focus with the distance from your subject.

A broad focus (OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS) is like a movie “establishment shot” — a long range view that establishes location (topic) but gives no detail.

*Tell me about yourself.*

A medium focus (PARTICULAR QUESTIONS) is like the normal camera lens which picks out the specific area you want to look at, but still leaves a lot of leeway.

*All right, let's talk about your education.*

A tight focus (CLOSED QUESTIONS) is the telephoto lens that lets us see every pore in the actor's face: so close that we can drive a truck up his left nostril.

*Did you study physics? Chemistry? Geology? What were your marks?*

No room for interviewee maneuvering there!

Too much of one is as bad as too much of another. If you spend all your time in tight focus, you don't know what's going on elsewhere. If you linger too long on the broad picture, you long for detail.

As a rule of thumb, start with open questions, move to particular, then focus in with closed questions. Then start the procedure again (open, particular, closed).

Examples:

1. OPEN-ENDED

*How are things?*

*How's the world treating you?*

2. PARTICULAR

*Tell me about the night shift.*

*What about your post-grad work?*

3. CLOSED

*What year did you graduate?*

*Can you type 50 WPM?*

The OPEN-ENDED questions allow interviewees to choose the topic. The PARTICULAR questions identify the ballpark, but let them choose what part of the park they want to play in. The CLOSED ques­tions nail them firmly to the floor. There should be no room for eva­sion in a closed question.

The degree of impact rises from very low in the open questions to very high in the closed. Open questions ask for novels: particular questions demand essays: and closed questions will settle for a word or two. To use them effectively, alternate from open through particular to closed — frequently.

STRATEGIES

In addition to the principles noted above, there are three “strategies” recognized for conducting good interviews:

A. Direct

B. Indirect

C. Non-Directive.

Direct questioning is used in clear-cut situations where the data to be learned is very straightforward.

Examples:

*Where were you on the night of Jan. 14?*

*Have you graduated from a recognized business school?*

Indirect questioning is used where the subject matter can't be accessed by direct methods. For instance, how would you ask people if they can handle themselves under stress? The best way of digging this kind of data out is to use hypothetical questions (“If — what?” questions).

Examples:

*If you had to gather data about a government project's impact on a small town, how would you go about it?”*

*If your boss was away, and an irate client needed an answer RIGHT NOW, how would you handle the situation?”*

Non-directive questions are used in counselling, or when you don't know where the interview is going. When you are in a game you don't understand, with a deck that's short a few cards, you can play along with nondirective questions.

Examples:

*I see. Tell me more about that.*

*Why do you feel this way?*

*You say that you felt unsure of yourself, is that right?*

In a nutshell, if you want to interview well, you must be both ques­tioner and listener. This means that you have to learn to shut up and listen!

You can use interview skills equally well with friends, kids, team members, co-workers or subordinates. The rewards for being a good inter­viewer escalate in proportion to the degree of closeness between you and the other person.

**MEDIATING CONFLICT**

Sometimes the boss is called on to settle disputes, feuds and rival­ries between subordinates.

Most of us find that an uncomfortable role. Sitting between two angry people isn't the nicest activity in the world! Police officers know that inter­vening in a domestic dispute is one of the most dangerous duties they have, and cemeteries are full of good cops who tried to save a wife from a beating only to be turned on by both parties. “He may be a mug, but he's mine, and don't you lay a hand on him, you bum! Take this!” she yells as she whops the officer on the head with an ashtray.

Bosses interfere in private vendettas only when they start to affect the work.

If Mary and Bill are at war, they will battle wherever and whenever they get the chance. That includes meetings, problem-solving sessions, working lunches, and decision-making gatherings. The result is that there are a lot of badly-aimed torpedoes around, and when they miss the mark they may sink your ship. At the very least they slow you down.

Mediating disputes isn't easy, because of the high emotions you en­counter. But here's a program for handling these situations. It's called the Rule of Paraphrase. It's used in international conferences of various types to ensure that the translator not only got the words right but also conveyed the meaning behind the words.

*RULE OF PARAPHRASE*

“PARTICIPANTS MAY NOT SPEAK UNTIL THEY HAVE PARAPHRASED THE PREVIOUS SPEAK­ER'S REMARKS TO THE PREVIOUS SPEAKER'S SATISFACTION.”

This is slow going! But if the participants aren't listening to each other it's a good way to get them fully communicating.

The idea here is that most arguments and disputes are based on wrong information. Each party has misunderstood the other. Paraphrasing lets them reach the point of actually understanding each other. (They may still disagree, but at least it will be about the same thing).

*Here's an example*. A referee is mediating a dispute between a land­lord and a tenant. The landlord wants to evict the tenant for non-payment of rent. The tenant refuses to go. The referee is to hear the argument before it goes to court.

As our scene opens, we find Mr. Sam Landlord wearing his 3-piece suit and an old school tie. Mr. “Hip” Tenant is in patched jeans.

REFEREE Okay folks, we just have one rule here. Before you get a chance to say your piece, you have to say back what you heard the other person say, to the other person's satisfaction.

LANDLORD I didn't come here to play games.

REFEREE That's the rule, just the same. Otherwise we pack it up now and you can go to court. (BOTH PARTIES NOD RELUCTANTLY). Okay, let's flip a coin to see who goes first. (LANDLORD WINS).

LANDLORD This damn hippy here hasn't paid his rent for three months. What's more, he grows grass on the premises. I mean the kind you smoke. He certainly doesn't mow it! He plays his guitar late at night and the neigh­bours complain.

REFEREE All right, Mr. Tenant, it's your turn. But I'd like you to start by just re­peating back what you heard Mr. Land­lord say.

TENANT Huh?...Sorry, I guess I, uh, wasn't listening. I was thinking about what I was gonna say.

REFEREE In that case, say it again, Sam.

LANDLORD (SMIRKING) Well, as I was saying.....(HE SAYS IT ALL OVER AGAIN).

REFEREE What did he say, Mr. Tenant?

TENANT (GRUMBLING) He said I hadn't paid my rent for three months, and that I smoke a lot of pot.

REFEREE Is that what you said, Mr. Landlord?

LANDLORD No, I said that he doesn't mow the grass, and he annoys the neighbours.

REFEREE What did he say, Mr. Tenant?

TENANT He says I don't mow the grass and I bother the neigh­bours.

REFEREE Is that what you said, Mr. Landlord?

LANDLORD Yes.

REFEREE Okay, Mr. Tenant, what's your side of this?

TENANT I don't pay the rent because Mr. Landlord won't fix the stove or the fridge and the toilet backs up all the time.

LANDLORD See here, I won't put up with —

REFEREE Hold it, Mr. Landlord. The rules say that you can't comment till you've paraphrased Mr. Tenant. What did he say?

LANDLORD (GRUDGINGLY) He says I haven't fixed the fridge or the stove, and the toilet backs up.

REFEREE Is that what you said, Mr. Tenant?

TENANT Yup.

REFEREE Okay, Mr. Landlord, go ahead.

LANDLORD It's true I didn't fix those things, but that's because I warned him about the other things, and he said he'd stop, but he didn't, so I just went right ahead and ...

The reason why the referee had to enforce the Rule of Paraphrase was that neither party was listening to the other. Each was instead busy re­hearsing what he would say when he got the chance.

When that little tape recorder is whirring inside our heads, we don't hear very well. When your feuding employees reach the stage where you have to take a direct hand, try the Rule of Paraphrase technique.

Get them to agree to the Rule first, then enforce it at your earliest op­portunity so they'll know you mean business. This way you have a chance to get at the real causes of disagreement.

**NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATIONS**

There's an old saying, “What goes in one ear comes out the other”. But you don't hear anyone saying “What goes in one eye comes out the other”, do you?

We remember what we see more than what we hear. That is why you're not fooled when she says “Of course I love you, Silly!” — but doesn't look at you when she says it.

Body language is a method of communicating that is often so subtle that we're not even aware that we're receiving data, (though we are). A bright eye, a finger twitch, a turn of the foot — such clues as these are enough to tell us things that words do not or cannot express.

We can learn to be much better readers of body language. Just reading this chapter will improve your skills, simply by raising your awareness. Your four-year old kid is an expert in body language, and you used to be when you were his age, too. It's just a matter of re-learning a skill that you lost when spoken language erased it.

There are lots of great books on this “silent language”, but let's start here with four simple ideas.

**1. POSTURE**

Like all body language, posture varies in meaning according to the culture you were raised in. There are no universal meanings: you have to look at people in context. But here are some reasonably solid things to look for:

Concurrence. Does the other person share your stance, or is it opposing? If you are leaning back, elbow on the desk, is the other person doing the same? If so, he is probably in sympathy with what you are saying. If he was in a concurrent position, and then changes it, check to see if you have said something he finds unac­ceptable.

Angle of the body. Is the other person leaning toward you? This position demonstrates energy, and could be for you (enthusiasm) or against you (argument). Or is he leaning away, suggesting resistance or critical thought?

Arms. When people put their arms akimbo, or cross them over their genitals, they often seem defensive. On the other hand, when the arms are open they appear more accepting. That is something for you to remem­ber when you are conducting an interview. Stay open, at least for a few minutes.

**2. GESTURES**

Positive gestures include “thumbs up”; palms open; “round the world” gestures with the arms; pat on the back; and arms around the shoulders.

Negative gestures include “stop sign” with the palm flat up toward the other person; the “single finger insult”; and the “sweeping away” with one or both hands.

In a Meetings Skills seminar, a man wondered why his interviews seemed to go well for the first few minutes and then crash. “Let's do a simulation,” the instructor suggested, “and put it on videotape. Do it just the way you would back home.” Another student played the inter­viewee.

He did a good job of tension reduction for the first two minutes. Then, after offering a welcoming cup of coffee, he pushed his chair back, picked up his pen and pointed it like a gun at the hapless interviewee, narrowed his eyes, pursed his lips, and said, “Well! Enough of this small talk — let's get down to business.”

When the class de-briefed, the interviewee referred to the pen/gun ex­perience as a “dash of cold water”. The interviewer simply refused to believe that he had done any such thing, and was convinced only when the videotape was played back.

The habit was an old one, perhaps picked up from watching his father, and it was so ingrained and unconscious that he was unaware of it.

It's important not only to read other people well, but also to come across to others the way you want to be perceived. To change counter-productive body language, you have to identify the behavior first. Ask a trusted friend to sit in on an interview and give you feedback on how you're coming across. Or videotape yourself in practice sessions and play it back without sound. Silent screening allows you to concentrate on just the visual aspect of your style.

**3. MANNERISMS**

You can sometimes pick out signs of nervousness or other emotion by watching the hands, feet, and eyes. If the other person suddenly starts fiddling with a pen or shuffles his feet or stares out the window, chances are you've hit some kind of a nerve.

**4. EYE CONTACT**

You've probably heard it said that “he's really honest — he looks you square in the eye.” That might have been true at one time of one par­ticular culture, but you can't go by it today. Every conman worth his salt has mastered the trick to a fare-thee-well, but lots of thoroughly honest people from various cultures, such as Inuit, for example, con­sider looking at you straight in the eye as an act of rudeness.

One thing you can rely on, at least to some degree, is this: when people get excited their blood pressure usually goes up. You can detect this in the eye, where more fluid gathers. More fluid means greater reflectivity, and thus a “bright-eyed” person!

No brief tutorial can teach you body language. But you can teach your­self (or, rather, re-teach yourself). The purpose of this chapter is merely to remind you of a forgotten skill, and encourage you to take it out of the closet, dust it off, apply a little rust paint, and get it going again.

**PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS**

Performance evaluation interviews are impossible to do.

That's because you are asked to perform two diametrically opposed roles at the same time:

• Judge, jury, executioner.

• Friend, guide, counsellor.

As judge, jury and executioner, you have to examine and rate your subordinates according to a scale invented by people who don't know you, your unique operation, or your staff. You're expected to play God. The employees' income, prospects for future promotion, or work as­signments, may depend directly on what you write down on the P.E. sheet. That's a lot of power, and your subordinates know it!

On the other hand, you're also supposed to help them analyze their training needs, identify weaknesses so that they may be corrected, and counsel when necessary. This is supposed to be a career interview, in which the last twelve months are examined and plans for the next twelve months are laid.

Like I said, impossible.

Nevertheless, you have to do them.

Your best bet might be to conduct an on-going series of regular mini-perfor­mance interviews throughout the year, and then hold two formal but entirely separate annual interviews with different purposes: one for pay and promotion, and the other for development and career. Some police forces have taken this route in recent years: promotion is based on passing exams and an oral board, while the evaluation review is sup­posed to help the constable improve his performance.

We can think of these interviews as demonstrating the “Janus Ef­fect” in honour of the Roman god of thresholds and the New Year. We derive the name “January” from him.

Janus had two faces: one looked back, the other looked ahead. When we look back, we try to find perspective and meaning in the year that has elapsed: and when we look forward, we set goals for the year to come.

So let's not waste time complaining about the hard fact that we abso­lutely must conduct these interviews. The organizations we work for de­mand it. Let's instead spend some time figuring out how to make them worthwhile.

Let's talk about performance appraisal from the viewpoints of PREPARING and CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW.

**PREPARING**

**Previous Interviews**

The performance evaluation interview should be a culmination of all the other interviews you've had with your staff all year long. If you only do it once in twelve months, you can hardly expect to get very real. The session will resemble your very first formal dance, where you never got past “May I have this dance?” and “Yes, I'd be thrilled”.

**Records**

Some managers keep “little black books” so that they will have “something to talk about” when the Great Day comes. The trouble with little black books is that they tend to fill up with negative data. Here you're interviewing your Number One Strong Right Arm, and all you've got to tell him is that he was late twice in January? What a let-down! (And you should have discussed the January lateness in Jan­uary any­way! Why wait till June, when it's too late to do anything about it?) By all means check your records to refresh your memory, but look up all the positive actions too.

**Design**

Set up your interview so that the employee participates before you do. This means you have to plan your questions so that the other person has positive topics to discuss. You might ask him to fill in a form on himself a week or so earlier, then compare your own penciled-in form with his.

**Time**

Allow at least an hour for each employee. You can't get very far in less than that. Some smart bosses take their subordinates out for “working lunches” and use the opportunity for sounding them out in terms of their feelings for or against the organization, problems to be worked on, training needed, and so on. Don't be like one manager who yells at her people when she sees them in the hall, just outside her door: “Hey Jill, got a minute? Let's get this damn evaluation over with!”....and four minutes later Jill is standing out in the hall again, wondering what hap­pened.

**Feedback**

One thing your subordinate wants from you is to know “How'm I do­ing?” But that means giving both positive and negative feedback. Most people can handle positive feedback okay (we all like praise), but lots of us can't manage criticism. If it's worth giving at all, it's got to be planned.

**Rules For Giving Constructive Negative Feedback**

Remember that you are helping them solve problems, not punishing them for “being bad”.

Be concrete. Don't guess at causes: deal with the actual perceived behaviour. (In other words, talk about Monday lateness, not presumed alcoholism). Use tact to bring up delicate matters.

Create a positive atmosphere by using expressions like “problems” rather than “faults” or “weaknesses”. Problems have solutions: faults and weaknesses have pun­ishments.

Involve them in seeking solutions. Don't just “tell 'em what to do” — ask them what they think they should do.

Get commitment. Go for a decision. Ask them when they're going to start. Tell them you'd like them to report on their progress. You care.

**CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW**

Here's a suggested step-by-step format for a successful performance evaluation interview.

Impact Reduction - Set the other person at ease by offering coffee or chatting about a safe topic. But not too much small talk, or you'll make him nervous!

Positive Feedback - Start by asking the other person about her good experiences over the past year. “What went really well for you this year, Helen?” Or, if you know that the ABC Project was a great success, say, “Tell me about the ABC Project, Helen. It went well, didn't it?”

Negative Feedback - Once you've established a smooth flow of dialogue, ask for the difficult areas. “What problems did you encounter?” Naturally, you have your own list, but it can wait, can't it? If you give people a chance to bring problems up, they usually will. Then you can help solve them, rather than having to level criticism. If they don't bring up the problems you want to deal with, then you will bring them up later.

**Comparing Assessments**

If the other person has filled in a blank form, compare hers with yours. Make sure that yours is in pencil, NOT typed and signed by the big boss. Such documents are hard to change. For instance, suppose you have written, “Julie has dealt effectively with her alcoholism this year”, and Julie wants it deleted. You thought you were paying her a compli­ment but now you find that she doesn't even want it mentioned. It's hard to make changes if it's already gone through the mill. The reason for the insistence on pencil is that it's a signal to the other person that you are willing to listen and to make changes. The interview now becomes a negotiation to produce a paper you can both live with.

**Looking Ahead**

Set goals for the New Year. Decide them together. Set reporting dates and deadlines.

**Concluding**

End on a positive note. Reinforce the behaviour that was successful last year by referring to it warmly, and reaffirm the decisions reached to solve the problems.

The real reason for having performance evaluation interviews isn't what the company says it is.

The company says it needs data for making administrative decisions such as training plans, promotion schemes, bonus payments, and so on.

While it's true that they do want those things, your own personal inter­face with staff is a more urgent need. Your reason for going to all this trouble is: behavioural change.

If they don't decide to do things differently, to fix problems, to shape up and to wrestle the new year right to the ground....then you missed the boat.

**RITUAL GREETINGS**

We do it every day, many times a day, and we're not even aware we're doing it. Nobody notices it unless we don't do it.

*Hi, John, how are you?*

*Fine thanks, Mary, how're you?*

*Fine, thanks.*

When we don't do it, everybody says, “Gee, what's the matter with Mary today?”

Ritual greetings are barometers tuned to our personal weather report. If we're warm and sunny we say our good mornings with a smile and a lilt. When we're overcast we glower and grunt, or deny the greeting altogether.

No one really knows, but it's a fair guess to say that ritual greetings go back to our earliest tribal experiences. Animals all do it. Birds preen, monkeys groom, dogs sniff.

So what do we as bosses learn from this?

**SAY GOOD MORNING**

Remember to say “Hello” to people when you come in in the morning, and give them a chance to exchange pleasantries about the weather with you. It gives them a lift. It says that you noticed them, and that they're important. Better get those names straight!

**GET FEEDBACK**

Listen to your subordinates when they say good morning to you. Sometimes they are trying to tell you something with their intonation or body language. Compare these two responses to an ordinary “How are you today?” —

*Response A: Just great, thanks! How about you?*

*Response B: Oh — okay, I guess.*

The second response might tell you that someone's having a heavy emotional problem, and wants you to ask him about it. He can't vol­un­teer it, for one reason or another (maybe he's shy), so he's using the rit­ual greeting as a HELP flag.

**BE CONSISTENT**

As boss you have to maintain consistency of manner. That's one of the things you're paid for.

Don't try to escape your duty by saying that you “won't be phony” or “pretend to be something you're not”. All of us have to “be something we're not” 24 hours a day. Why should you be the exception? Every time you use a washroom or drive a car or wear clothes, you're “being something you're not”. You weren't born with those behaviours: you learned them. Being professional — maintaining a good-humoured, tol­erant, understanding, goal-oriented persona on the job — is also something you learn to do.

So, even if your head hurts and your stomach's growling and your spouse said not to bother coming home tonight and you got a speeding ticket on the way to work and someone's in your parking space — say good morning and smile!

Why do you discipline other people? To get them to behave differently, of course.

If you apply discipline to punish, take revenge, or ex­press your righteous moral indignation, expect return fire.

When we discipline children, we want them to understand why the be­haviour is not acceptable. The best way to do it is to invite the child into a problem-solving mode with you, and examine the consequences of the behaviour together. If you merely beat the child to vent your rage, the child will surely ob­serve that the capricious parent is indeed bigger and stronger, and must therefore be lied to more carefully next time.

Disciplining staff is somewhat similar. In both cases, we have a person with authority, holding the power to punish or withhold privilege, who has caught the other person in an unacceptable act. The usual misdemeanors include lateness, missed deadlines, declining production, tele­phone/computer abuse, long lunches or coffee breaks, mistreatment of clients, etc.

The first natural human reaction is to lie, hedge or blame someone else. That’s why you must keep your emotions firmly under control, and get the other per­son to (a) accept responsibility for the problem, and (b) fix it.

**THE DISCIPLINE LADDER**

There are four rungs in the Discipline Ladder:

**Rung One (Counsel)**

It's just common sense, isn't it? You should begin by trying to find out what the cause of the problem is, and get the other person involved in fixing it. Check out the chapters on DIRECTIVE COUNSELLING and PERSONAL COUNSELLING for the techniques.

This can be as simple as just asking a question (“I notice you've been late for work four times this month. That's very unusual for you. What's the reason for this?”).

It's obviously better to try to counsel than to simply issue a stern warning and send the offender away crippled. If you make other people feel stupid or guilty, you release a lot of crazy bad feelings: desire for revenge, sabotage, that sort of thing. If they hate and fear you, they can't think very well. You know how that goes: when you're really upset you say and do things that after­wards you can't even remember. If it happens to you, it happens to them too, right? And if your subordinates feel like that — how much work will you get out them today?

When you counsel, you are trying to get the other person to treat the behaviour as a problem to be solved rather than as a fault to be pun­ished. Here are some magic words that will help put the other person in the adult mode with you:

*Had your morning coffee yet? How about having some with me.*

*We seem to be having a problem here with lateness. Tell me about it.*

*I notice that you've been with us for ten years and up to now you've had an excellent attendance record. Lately it's been slipping. What's up?*

**Rung Two (Counsel and Warn)**

If the other person won't talk, or refuses to accept responsibility, you may have to pull those sergeant's stripes out of your pocket and slap them on your sleeve. Pull rank and move to Rung Two.

Likewise, you would move to the second rung if the counselling did not have the desired effect. If John Tardy continues to arrive late, even af­ter he's promised to get a new clock and join a different car pool, then you'll have to bring him in again and try to find out what the problem really is. And you must warn him what will happen if the be­haviour continues.

The warning should be issued matter-of-factly:

*•John, it's my duty to tell you that if you come in late one more time without a legitimate reason, you'll be docked an hour's pay*.

Be sure that you can really carry out the threat! It's embarrassing to discover that you really aren't allowed to stake them to an ant hill in mid-August, when you promised that is what you would do.

Before you issue a warning, check with Personnel.

**Rung Three (Counsel, Punish, Warn Again)**

If the behaviour still persists, try one more time to get the other person into a counselling mode. But this time you'll have to go ahead and award the punishment that you promised in Rung Two.

Do this non-judgmentally:

*Last time we talked, we discussed the penalty for continued lateness. Now it has become necessary.*

Follow it with another warning, escalated from the previous one.

Usually, that's the end of it. Most subordinates, when they discover that you have a bite as well as a bark, will fix the problem. They'll perform acceptably for a while, stay clean for six months or a year, and then start with Rung One again. These people are called “marginal performers”, and they take up a lot of your time.

But if not....

**Rung Four (Take Action)**

But before you take that final step, do your homework. Do you have the hard evidence to make it stick if you transfer, demote or fire them, and they challenge you? Is it thor­oughly and impeccably documented? Did you check with Personnel to find out what the correct procedures are? (You can't just throw up your arms and shout, “You're fired!” and boot them out the door, you know!) Do you know how the union agreement reads?

There’s a school of management today that believes that once you’ve made the decision, there should be no further contact between you and the fired employee. They should just come to work one day and find them­selves escorted to the street, along with the contents of their desk in a bag, While this action no doubt works, many managers — especially in small firms where there has been some personal contact — find this cold and inhuman.

Those managers may want to conduct an exit interview.

It's probably too late to salvage the situation, but it may be worth one last try to find out what the root of the problem really was. After you've com­pleted the formal part of the interview, close the file and chat for a while. Sometimes the terminated employee will level with you in such a non-threatening moment.

Termination is an expensive and traumatic waste of time. It costs you, it costs them, it costs the taxpayers and the customers. What’s more, that no-good you fired has to be replaced! That means you have to write an ad, interview applicants, choose someone, and then train them. No fun at all.

The best chance you have of short-circuiting this whole sorry mess is to do a great job of counselling your subordinate in the first place. Don't wait till Performance Evaluation time to tell John Tardy he was late six months ago: tell him now, when he can do something about it.

Discipline is for fixing behaviour problems, not punishment.

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This concludes my book on how to conduct an effective management interview, part three of a series on managing in the new millennium. I hope you’ve found it engaging and useful. I invite you to try my other books: [Communications Skills for Managers Old and New](http://www.amazon.ca/Communication-Skills-Managers-Old-BossTalk-ebook/dp/B00ABKOFIC/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1395195559&sr=8-1&keywords=communications+skills+for+managers+terry+barker), [How to Talk to Your Staff](http://www.amazon.ca/talk-your-staff-Boss-Talk-ebook/dp/B00ABL1K52/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1395195588&sr=8-1&keywords=how+to+talk+to+your+staff+terry+barker).

For the full guide on managing in the new millennium get my master Bosstalk edition available on Amazon or this website. Good luck and please stay in touch with your own stories and advice. I’m always interested – always the teacher, always the student.

Good luck and happy managing!

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