

Title:

Overcoming Defensiveness in Employee Performance Evaluation Discussions

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Summary:

There sits Sally on the other side of the desk during her performance evaluation.

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Article Body:

There sits Sally on the other side of the desk during her performance evaluation. She's scowling. Her arms are folded tightly across her chest. Her lower lip is turned out in a way that communicates both rejection and contempt. She's flipped the performance evaluation she just read upside down on your desk as though it were some loathsome bug. She slowly shakes her head back and forth in a model of negativity. Looking you straight in the eye, she says, "Do you call this a performance evaluation?"

George is exactly the opposite. His employee performance evaluation, like the one you wrote about Sally, also told the truth about the fact that the quality of his work in the past twelve months wasn't all that you expected and that immediate improvement is required. But George isn't arguing; he isn't negative in the slightest. In fact, he's bafflingly positive about the negative review. He says that he agrees with everything you've said and tells you that you don't have to give him any details or examples. You're right, he says. He understands. He's so contrite and remorseful, you almost feel apologetic about having written such a negative – but honest – evaluation. He promises to turn over a new leaf immediately and asks if there's anything else you need as he gets up and starts walking out the door.

These are two entirely different responses to a negative employee performance evaluation. But both reactions can be described with the same word – defensive.

Defensive reactions come in two forms: fight or flight. Fight responses – what Sally displayed – show up as angry rejections of what the appraiser has said or written. The individual may deny the accuracy of the appraiser's information or blame others for problems and shortcomings. Non-verbal indicators of fight

reactions are usually clear: the person may pound the desk or point his finger. She may raise her voice or fold her arms defiantly across her chest. He may glare and refuse to engage in a normal business-like conversation.

Flight reactions – what you saw in George – are entirely different. Here the individual's voice becomes quieter, not louder. He looks away, turns away. He speaks softly and agrees easily in order to change the subject. While the individual displaying a fight reaction may discount having any responsibility for the problems identified, the individual manifesting a flight reaction may take far more responsibility for a problem than the truth of the matter actually warrants.

Fight and flight reactions are hard-wired, genetically-based, normal human defense mechanisms for dealing with threatening situations. If your stone-age ancestor stumbled upon a testy mastodon, his alternatives were flight, fight, or get trampled. Defensive reactions served a survival purpose but they are out of place in the contemporary office. Here's how to deal with them.

Fight reactions during an employee performance evaluation are best handled by allowing the individual time to vent. Encouraging the full expression of opinion is actually a wise approach, since many of these storms will blow themselves out if they're allowed to.

Active listening is critical in dealing with fight reactions. Ask the individual for examples. Listen to what she has to say.

Here's a key point: In dealing with a fight reaction, your behavior should be the opposite of the individual's. As her emotional temperature gets hotter, yours should get cooler. As the employee starts to speak more rapidly, you should allow more pauses in what you say. If the individual's volume increases, you should lower your voice.

Flight reactions are more subtle. The individual seeks metaphorically to flee the threatening situation. The easiest way is simply to agree with whatever is being said, change the subject, and move on. The challenge to appraisers in an employee performance evaluation when flight reactions arise is to continue to focus on the performance deficiency until there is complete understanding.

Too often, though, the appraiser feels just as awkward and nervous about confronting George with the fact that his performance was less than acceptable as George is in getting the bad news. The result is that the appraiser doesn't drill down to the hard realities and allows the immediate defensive acceptance to bring the discussion to a premature end.

For example, as soon as he's presented with the truthful evaluation, George says, "Yes. You're right. I really did do a bad job this year. And I appreciate your bringing it to my attention. And you can count on me to do better in the future. I promise, I really will."

We tend to be so relieved about not having to go through an unpleasant confrontation that we may accept George's hastily offered, doubtfully sincere assurances and move on. But if we accept his statement as presented, it's unlikely that there will be any real understanding or genuine commitment to change. That's why during the employee performance evaluation the effective manager says something like, "Thanks, George. I'm glad we both look at it the same way. But let's actually go through analyzing what happened this year. If we do that, then you can make some plans that will really make a difference in the upcoming twelve months."

Fight and flight reactions aren't the most common reactions to employee performance evaluations. Since most people perform well, accept honest feedback, and possess a high degree of maturity, the likely response to a performance appraisal is understanding and acceptance – even to those parts that aren't totally flattering. If we realize that defensive reactions are part of the essential human condition, and have the patience to continue a business-like discussion of the performance evaluation in spite of any initial defensive reactions, we're likely to break through the defensiveness and end up with a productive conversation.