

I'm not going to pretend tough performance reviews should be easy. And if you're stressing over a review you must give tomorrow, most of what I'm writing here won't help you much. But laying the right foundation can take some of the pain out of future difficult conversations.

### Three Principles

**A Track Record of Caring.** I've often said that *management* is about the success of your organization, *leadership* is about the success of your people. Of course, successful organizations need successful people. Management and leadership skills are both important, but different. If you're only sending management messages about what a person needs to do to help the organization succeed, get used to difficult reviews. Resistance goes down (and organizational success goes up) when someone knows their leaders are committed to their personal success. Note that I call this a *track record*, not just an occasional event.



**Manage Expectations.** Set clear expectations from the start – and I mean from the first job interview. Give strong, consistent messages about organizational values and expected behaviors – like how we treat each other – as well as the technical expectations spelled out in a clear job description. Follow that with specific, measurable goals for each performance period. (Good leaders *never* go a year between performance conversations!) Add in regular, supportive check-ins along the way. Surprises at a performance review are the leader's fault, not the employee's.

**Emotional Intelligence.** We should be concerned if someone doesn't feel bad about underperforming. And if your own emotions weren't in play you wouldn't be stressing over giving a poor review. Some of us express emotions more than others. But expressed or not we need to be aware of our emotions and theirs, responding appropriately to both. The better we've done at managing expectations, the easier it is to focus objectively on performance. The stronger our track record of caring, the less likely negative emotions (theirs or ours!) will take control of the conversation. I've let a performance review stretch over several conversations, pausing so we could both process and reflect before moving forward.

### Aligning the Pieces

It's selfish to give a better review than the person deserves. It's abdicating our responsibility as leaders and it doesn't help them or our organization. That doesn't necessarily mean dumping everything on them at once. Our leadership goal is their growth and success. Our management goal is the success of our organization. It's our responsibility to tend to both.

A healthy culture takes much of the pain out of performance reviews. Some cultural components that contribute to that are clearly practiced mission and values, good hiring practices, performance plans that are linked to organizational strategy, clear short-cycle goals, regular 1-on-1 meetings, and strong leadership (as opposed to just management) skills.

The most common pushback I get is that no one has time for all of these "soft" practices. You can invest that time up front to reap the benefits or spend it later on lower performance and cleanup efforts.