



Annual Performance Review Meetings

At this time of year I thought it may be interesting to consider some communication tips that may be valuable for one of my favourite forms of meeting – the annual performance review....

When preparing for the meeting there is an obvious focus on you: your role; your KPIs; your achievements; your talents; and your disappointments – not necessarily in that order. However, it is critical to remember to spend some time thinking about the other person in the meeting. We all know that communication is a 2-way activity. So, what do you know about your reviewer and how might that help you in the meeting?

- Think about your reviewer's communication style. If they like written evidence of your achievements then prepare a handout. Make it detailed if they like detail or use graphs if they like pictures. Don't bother if they just want to talk. And if you are not sure about their preferences, it won't hurt to ask what they would like you to bring along.
- Consider their thinking patterns when ordering your part of the conversation. They may like a chronological account of your year. Alternatively they may prefer it sorted into chunks (eg quantitative then qualitative). They may appreciate a top down account (ie overall summary against your main objectives, then working down to specifics). Some characters like it built from the bottom up. Again, if you're not sure ask them (or someone else who knows them well).
- You might like to think about their conversation style. Do they employ formal or informal language in these meetings? How colloquial should you be? Do they welcome first person descriptions (eg "I achieved my project goals") or put more weight on 3rd person references (eg "Sally was impressed with the project")?
- Finally, you might dare to speculate on what mood your reviewer will be in. Is this a pleasant task for them? Do they seem to be more relaxed and positive in the morning or afternoon – and when is your meeting scheduled? Who is s/he meeting before you and what impact will that conversation have on her/his mood? If the mood is likely to be unfavourable, see if you can reschedule. If that's not practical, think about how to start the conversation with the aim of improving it.

Another critical principle that applies to any communication is being clear on your message and your outcomes. By the end of the meeting, what is the most important thing that you want your reviewer to be thinking about you? How will you ensure that message is received? You might like to think of specific outcomes that you would like to achieve. This might be the right time, for example, to express your interest in a promotion (but probably not your reviewer's job) or at least some change in your role and responsibilities. It may also be an appropriate time to seek approval for a particular training course or development program.

a question of success



In all of this planning about your outcomes, what you are going to say and how you are going to present it you could easily forget that the other fundamental skill you will need is listening. When your reviewer is providing her/his perspective it is really important that your active listening skills are fully operational:

- When they are commenting favourably about your performance, be open to the praise and perhaps explore what they really liked. eg If you hear “your reports are very clear” you might pursue it further. eg “What is it about my reports that make them clear to you?”
- When they are commenting unfavourably about your performance, be curious and not defensive. eg If you hear “your reports are not at all easy to understand” there is an obvious human temptation to be defensive eg “Well no-one else seems to have a problem with them”. A more effective response is to enquire further. It will be important to seek specific examples. You could also ask what they can suggest would help.
- In listening to your reviewer’s assessment, remember that they are merely communicating their perception. Hence, your mindset should be conditioned to exploring their impressions, rather than responding via your version of reality. People often take time to shift their impressions so don’t be too disappointed if your reviewer is not enthusiastic about the improvements you think you have made since last year.

Finally, to ensure that the communication is successful, a summary of the outcomes would be beneficial for both parties. If your reviewer doesn’t wrap it up in their haste to exit then you should attempt a short review of the main points – stressing your message. And please, in all of the excitement, don’t forget to thank your reviewer for their open and honest assessment!

It may be stressful but it is possible to plan and execute a successful performance review meeting – by employing great communication skills.