

It's time to get rid of performance reviews

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Most employees look forward to the annual performance review the way they look forward to a root canal. Feelings range from anxiety and angst to annoyance and anger.

Not that performance reviews are a thrill for managers. Typically, they involve hours of preparation, and the outcome is often an employee who is less engaged than before.

If you add the antiquated practice of forced ranking, the result is more people who are disillusioned, disconnected and demoralized than before you started.

Sure, the philosophy behind performance reviews is noble: By giving employees constructive feedback about their work, you encourage individual peak performance and build more effective teams.

Unfortunately, in many organizations today, reviews aren't really designed to help employees grow; they're designed to manage promotions and raises. The conversation tends to be more about "here is why you aren't getting a raise" and less about "here's how you can add value to the company and your career." In other words, they've become the opposite of what they were intended to be.

So are performance reviews obsolete? Is it time to ditch this archaic exercise, which takes up valuable staff hours with no apparent gain? The answer is a resounding "yes" – but only if you're willing to replace it with something far more worthwhile.

To develop your human capital, your emphasis needs to be on supporting and helping employees succeed, not on divvying up the budget for salary increases. Dialogues need to be more frequent, more focused on the future and on solving problems – and more collaborative. Enter the concept of weekly conversations.

Weekly conversations are planned 15-to-20-minute meetings between employees and direct managers. The emphasis is on progress and improvement, not criticism and finding faults.

Cover four areas. First, an update on the one to three action items agreed to at the last meeting. Second, one success story or "brag moment" of the employee's choosing. Third, brainstorm either a solution to a problem or an opportunity to be seized. And fourth, agree on one to three action items that the employee will focus on in the coming week.

Weekly conversations are not performance reviews; they are discussions. So talk less and let your employee talk more. Sit back, listen, ask questions for clarity. When it's your turn to speak, give positive feedback and offer constructive advice. Tell your employee what she did well and where you see opportunities for improvement. Specific examples are always helpful. If your employee is doing most of the talking – about her wins and challenges, how she's learning and growing – then you've mastered the notion of the weekly conversation.

Every three months, hold a quarterly conversation. Same basic structure as the weekly conversation, only this one is scheduled for 30 to 45 minutes. Go a little deeper on each of the four components, but add a fifth element – a discussion about the employee's career goals and aspirations, what

she can do to achieve them and, perhaps more importantly, how you can help. Can you assign relevant work, offer training or open doors? When you help your people achieve their professional goals, the collateral benefits will accrue to you and your department.

Weekly and quarterly conversations are immensely successful with a vast majority of staff, but sooner or later every leader comes up against a poor performer. When that happens, a different approach is necessary. Performance reviews still aren't the answer. The solution: Put the problem employee on a performance improvement plan with specific achievable targets and deadlines.

Most people – employees and managers – view performance reviews as a time-wasting administrative burden. In contrast, weekly conversations achieve positive outcomes – engaged employees, greater clarity on roles and objectives, alignment toward organizational goals and increased commitment. When done consistently, they can be hugely motivating.

The time has come: Let's get rid of performance reviews and replace them with weekly conversations.

The emphasis is on progress and improvement, not criticism and finding faults.