

Tough Love

The good manager's guide to delivering bad news in a performance review



“No one loves the messenger who brings bad news.”

-Sophocles

As a leader, you intuitively know that giving and getting honest feedback – even when it’s negative – is essential to developing your employees. It’s also integral to building a successful organization. So why do you dread it so much?

Because it’s uncomfortable!

Giving a bad performance review is never easy, but it’s a necessary part of effective workforce management. As a manager, it’s your job to provide employees with “tough love” – pointing out their shortcomings, making recommendations for corrective actions and giving praise where it’s due.

This eBook is designed to help good managers like you conduct productive reviews for less-than-stellar employees. It contains step-by-step instructions to:

- effectively deliver the balanced, honest performance feedback employees need;
- help employees understand exactly where and why they’re underperforming; and
- create a “no excuses” environment that supports stronger performance in the future.





Before the Review

Gather your information.

It's important to be objective when presenting any kind of feedback. Spend time in advance of the review to collect evidence of the poor behavior(s) you want to address. Cite at least two instances in each area that need to be improved, using emails, notes and other documentation to develop an air-tight case.

Try not to involve other subordinates.

Whenever possible, use examples you witnessed first-hand. It's dangerous to rely on hearsay, or to shift the responsibility for feedback to another employee.

Set an appropriate time and place.

As with all performance reviews, a bad review should be conducted privately. Schedule a one-on-one meeting with your employee, either in your office or in a conference room. Try to choose a day and time that's typically less hectic, so that the employee will be more focused and receptive to your feedback.





During the Review

Let your employee speak first.

To set the stage, try an introduction like: “Before I go into the details of this review, why don’t you tell me how you think you’ve performed over the past X months.” Why? More than likely, your employee realizes that at least some bad news is on the way. He’ll be more open to your feedback if he has an opportunity to articulate his view on his performance right up front, in his own words.

Letting your employee speak first also accomplishes several other goals. It:

- helps you gauge how aware he is of his performance problems;
- may provide you with examples you can refer to later; and
- sets you up to have the last word.

Keep your tone professional.

Your employee may become emotional or try to rile your emotions. Be prepared. Focus on the facts, control your tone of voice and limit your comments to the employee’s job performance.

Start on a positive note.

Begin your portion of the review by pointing out at least one good aspect of the employee’s performance. Thank the employee in advance for his willingness to listen and to learn in the review. Starting out on an upbeat note will make him more open to accepting the criticism that is about to come.





Be specific.

As you begin addressing your concerns, avoid sweeping generalizations or empty criticisms that fail to provide solid information: “You’re unreliable.” Instead, provide details that pinpoint specific behaviors: “You failed to submit your weekly report on time three times last month.”

Criticize the behavior, not the individual.

By focusing your feedback on specific actions (or lack of actions) in the workplace, you set the stage for collaboration. If the employee knows you’re not attacking him personally, he will be less likely to become defensive. Then the two of you can work together to change the behaviors that are causing his poor performance.

Share the evidence.

Present the specific examples you’ve gathered to support your assertions. This could include work he’s submitted (or failed to submit), notes you’ve kept about his performance or verifiable feedback from clients regarding the employee’s work. Explain exactly what behaviors are unacceptable – and why.

For every unacceptable behavior you list, provide an example of how the employee should have handled the situation. Suppose the employee reacted angrily to a co-worker who completed a task incorrectly. Explain to your employee that he could have handled the situation more effectively by acting as a leader and assisting his co-worker in completing the task correctly.





Set the stage for improvement.

Once you've shared the bad news, reaffirm your faith in your employee. Remind him of his value to your organization. Let him know that you believe in his abilities, and that it's just his behaviors you want to change. Tell him that you'd like to work together to turn his performance around.

Involve the employee in the solution.

You could spend all day suggesting ways for an employee to improve; but unless he truly understands what he needs to change, your suggestions won't work. So ask your employee to outline ways he can strengthen his own performance. If he has a hand in developing a solution, he'll be much more likely to implement it.

Set S.M.A.R.T. performance goals.

This goal-setting acronym is effective for one simple reason: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound goals are more likely to be achieved. As you work with your employee to improve his performance, help him create S.M.A.R.T. goals that will get him there. These goals will create a "no excuses" environment that fosters success.





At the Review's End

Agree on next steps.

Before leaving the review, agree on concrete action items related to performance improvement. If there are specific actions the employee needs to take or avoid, make sure they're clearly identified and agreed upon. If there is something you need to do, such as providing additional training, schedule it. End the review with a specific plan of action and a date to review progress.

Move on.

After you've delivered a tough review and agreed on resolution steps, you both need to move on with your jobs. Explain to your employee that it's important for neither of you to harbor ill will because of your discussions. Let him know that you will not "hover" over him scrutinizing his every move, but expect him to take the steps you've agreed upon to improve his performance.

Then take a deep breath and give yourself a pat on the back. You've done everything within your power to help your employee turn things around and become more successful in his job.





Final Thoughts

As a leader, your job is to communicate clearly and in a timely manner – whether the news is good or bad. If you see performance issues developing, don't wait for a quarterly or annual review to address them. Provide feedback quickly, constructively and directly, no matter how small the issue.

By nipping undesirable behaviors in the bud, you can often head-off potentially serious performance problems that can result from neglected communication. So meet with employees regularly to give them the “tough love” they need. Providing honest feedback, even if it's negative, shows employees that their success is important to you – and ultimately builds a more successful organization.



How to Give a Negative Employee Evaluation

<http://smallbusiness.chron.com/give-negative-employee-evaluation-22400.html>

Good Ways to Deliver Bad News

<http://www.fastcompany.com/36993/good-ways-deliver-bad-news>

How to Give a Bad Performance Review

http://www.ehow.com/how_6564563_give-bad-performance-review.html

How to Give a Bad Review

<http://quickbase.intuit.com/blog/2012/05/11/how-to-give-a-bad-review/>

Have to give that uncomfortable bad performance review? Let your employee talk first.

http://visular.typepad.com/managing_technology/2009/04/have-to-give-that-uncomfortable-bad-performance-review-let-your-employee-talk-first.html

How to Give Negative Feedback Properly

<http://management.about.com/cs/peoplemanagement/ht/negativefb.htm>

Dreading Giving a Bad Performance Review Part 2 of 2

<http://thenon-profittoolbox.com/2011/04/dreading-giving-a-bad-performance-review-part-2-of-2/>

