Top 10 Mistakes With Performance Reviews

By Laura A. Pfeiffer
Co-chair of the Employment Law Group at Winthrop & Weinstine, P.A.

1. **Not giving them.**

When a client calls and says they want to terminate an employee for performance reasons, one of my first questions is: “What was the employee last told about his or her performance?” If the answer is nothing and/or very little, it is much more challenging to try to use performance as the grounds for termination. It will also seem manifestly unfair if the matter is later contested. In addition, even if you have a regular or semi-regular performance review process in place, that does not mean that you should provide performance related information to employees at that interval only.

*Practice Pointer: If you don’t have a performance review process in place, make a goal to get one set up by the next year. Reviewing your employees’ performance with them on a regular basis is both good for productivity and legal protection. Also, review your employees with contemporaneous oral and written feedback (as appropriate) throughout the year – don’t wait for “review time” only.*

2. **Using unworkable process/forms.**

If you have a review process in place, take a hard look at whether it works for your company. I often see forms that supervisors have filled out after-the-fact that are cumbersome, don’t get at the desired information, and/or are not user-friendly in the slightest. While there is no magic form or process that works for every company, there is likely some room for improvement with any process. Also keep in mind that poorly written performance reviews can be a source of liability.

*Practice Pointer: Do not continue using your process/forms just because you have them. Read any written materials you are asking your supervisors to fill out carefully, solicit input from your supervisors on the process, and consider ways to streamline and improve what you have in place. Many employers are moving to electronic performance reviews as a way to make it easier for supervisors to complete the reviews, and to have a central depository for employee information that is easy to navigate.*
3. Not spending enough time to thoroughly, honestly and accurately complete the performance reviews.

Because most supervisors do not want to complete performance reviews, many wait until the last minute to complete them. This is not advisable, because it inevitably results in incomplete, cryptic or inaccurate reviews. Properly completed performance reviews can be time consuming, but it is time well spent because it puts an employee on notice of an issue so they can improve, or can be strong evidence in defense of a later challenge to a discipline or termination. A thorough examination of the entire review period will also allow you to avoid focusing only on the events that are more current or fresh in your mind.

Practice Pointer: Set a deadline for completing performance reviews that is weeks before you really need them to allow for time for the stragglers to get them in. Explain to your supervisors why it is important to properly complete performance reviews, giving examples as necessary. Tell them to examine the entire review period, not what just happened in the last several weeks. Don’t forget that a person cannot improve something if they are not aware of it in the first place, so let your employees know their areas of development by carefully completing their reviews.

4. Not checking prior documentation/events.

It is surprising how few supervisors will check how they reviewed an employee the year prior before completing a performance review. This is a mistake. Employees often know exactly how they were reviewed in every category the prior year, thus, the reviewing supervisor should be aware of such information. A supervisor may rate someone in one area a “5” last year and a “4” this year, and not even realize that they are downgrading the employee. Supervisors should also be aware of unusual personnel matters which may affect how a particular issue should be addressed in a review. For example, an employee who was on an approved leave should not be downgraded or given constructive criticism for attendance problems during that same timeframe.

Practice pointers: Pull all relevant documentation relating to the employee for the prior year, and carefully review it before filling out the employee’s performance review. This includes prior reviews, leave documentation, or related personnel information. If it isn’t given to you initially, ask for it from HR.

5. Being afraid to deliver criticism/sugarcoating the review (or, punting until next year or to your colleague next door).

It is uncomfortable to provide an employee with negative information. Be aware of the tendency to try to spare someone’s feelings, and be direct, honest and focus on the behaviors and traits related to his or her particular job. It does not help someone improve, or to document a performance deficiency from the company’s standpoint, if you fail to provide constructive criticism or sugarcoat problem areas. Give specific feedback and support it with examples of the employee’s actions.
Practice pointer: Don’t be “Minnesota-nice.” Prepare for and script out talking points on the most challenging points of the review, and practice how you are going to address the areas for improvement in the review. This will assist you in getting through that part of the review, and avoid faltering or not delivering the entire message if the employee gets argumentative or emotional. It will also help you to provide the information to the employee in a constructive and well-reasoned way.

6. Focusing only or too much on the negative.

One of the main objectives of performance reviews is to provide the “carrot” to motivate employees – not just to provide the “stick.” Don’t assume that the employee doesn’t need to or doesn’t want to hear all the things they do well, in addition to hearing potential areas of development. Employees often put a lot of value in meaningful feedback from their employer.

Practice Pointer: Be sure to take the time to share with the employee the things they are doing well.

7. Talking too much/not allowing the employee to provide information.

Encourage employees to provide their own assessment of their performance, and consider whether the employee should provide a self-evaluation ahead of time. Employees are often very self-aware of the things they do well, as well as the things they could do better. By allowing the employee to provide information during the review, you may learn information that could allow the working relationship between the company and the employee to improve.

Practice Pointer: Plan the key points you want to cover, but remember to listen and provide adequate time for the employee to provide you with their thoughts.

8. Not being consistent/not training supervisors on how to properly review employees.

If an employee reports to multiple supervisors, it is often very helpful to provide supervisory training on how to go about properly reviewing employees so that there is some level of consistency among the reviews. Without this information, different supervisors may have highly differing review standards which could result in inconsistencies.

Practice pointer: Train your supervisors on how you want them to complete performance reviews, and try to synthesize the feedback to increase consistency throughout the review.

9. Not moving to more formal processes when appropriate (i.e., performance improvement plan, etc.).

If an employee has a long laundry list of performance problems at review time, it is a mistake to just list them all out in the performance review. Serious consideration should be given to whether this employee should be put on a performance improvement plan, with short-term goals that must be met to avoid further disciplinary action, including termination.

Practice pointer: In appropriate circumstances, move to a more formal process such as a performance improvement plan.
10. Not treating the review with the utmost of importance.

Even for employees that are doing well, reviews can be a source of anxiety. As a result, do not postpone a review unless it is an emergency. Schedule an adequate amount of time for the review itself, and don’t allow any interruptions. No cell phones, texting, emailing or any interruptions.

**Practice Pointers:** Treat all reviews as important, and give your employees the respect they deserve.

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**Contact Laura Pfeiffer**

(612) 604-6685 | lpfeiffer@winthrop.com