



Performance Conversations: productive pursuit or a pointless pinnacle of pain?

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from our conversational coaching master class on Positive Performance Conversations © Bill Cropper 2011-15

I worked with one organisation a while ago that blithely referred to performance appraisal conversations as *“the annual tick-and-flick”*. I hope your performance conversations are more than just a once-or-twice a year ritual that almost everyone dreads. But I bet that for many of us, that’s exactly what they’ve been – and maybe will continue to be too...

We’re told by HR, and those who design appraisal systems, that they’re brilliant for boosting business performance, increasing morale and getting better outcomes. But a recent tweet I came across pretty much sums up what many of us on the user-end feel: *“Is everyone paranoid about their performance appraisals or is it just me and the other neurotics? My current supervisor makes me less nervous I must say, but I’ve always hated the damned things - doesn't matter if I think I’ve done brilliantly or not.”* There was, predictably, a multitude of sympathetic voices raised in response to this - and most agreed, with general comments along the lines of: *“We hate ‘em too.”*

Sure we tell people the whole point of performance appraisal is to help them improve what they do: bridge gaps, build skills, bolster constructive behaviour, and remove barriers to putting in their best effort. But these sentiments above seem to tell a different story; and it’s a worrying one for well-intentioned HR practitioners who back appraisal systems as winners.

Some research says only 40% of them actually work very well at all – and that estimate, it was intimated, may err on the generous side. Another *Society for Human Resources* survey said 9 out of 10 staff not only said they were painful, but that they didn’t work to improve their performance on the job. At this stage, you’ve got to wonder what some people have been through. *Was it a productive pursuit or a pointless pinnacle of pain?*



- ❑ Whether it’s a diligent or a more difficult performer, performance conversations commonly get avoided. Even good performers tend to shy away from them. Many staff think performance appraisals suck, because they’re a waste of time, said one recent survey. Appraisals also make them feel anxious and they don’t like being talked down-to.
- ❑ According to the same survey, managers detest them because they’re a waste of time, they don’t feel confident doing them (it makes them anxious?), it adds to their workload, and they’re not comfortable because they feel like they’re talking down to people. *Check me – but is this the same set of worries as what staff just said?*

There's many reasons why performance conversations can end up being uncomfortable, dissatisfying or ultimately un-instructive for many. For a start, in quite a number of organisations, the process just isn't taken seriously either by those being appraised, or those doing the appraising – and it often lacks top management interest or support too. Managers may mutter politically correct views about the benefits of performance appraisal, but it's often backed up by insignificant commitment and significant inaction.

On the symbolic side, it's pretty obvious that many workplaces don't allot enough time to conducting performance appraisals to even begin to do them justice – so it's seen token, and it often is. On the other end of the spectrum, performance appraisal and development evangelists have faith in the accuracy, virtue, fairness and shall I say, sacredness of their system. This doesn't go down well with those staff who, equally, hold they've been to hell and back in the same systemic boat!



On the rational side, some question how objective, specific, factual, fair and free from favouritism, prejudice or bias any system can really be, not to mention whether the metrics used are really relevant, rigorous, reliable or truly reflective of a good performance. For example:

- ? *Will this meet my need to know where I stand? Will it help me get better at what I do?*
- ? *Do the measures being used have a direct bearing on the really key performance aspects of my role?*
- ? *Will this help me grow personally or just focus on what management want me to in my current job*

On the emotional side, there's fear of treading on toes. Most of us dislike giving negative feedback. It can trigger defensive reactions we don't know how to handle, and the conversation can grow surprisingly uncomfortable quite suddenly. Even with good performers, we may still arrive at touchy, sensitive areas where we feel compelled to point out gaps as well as growth areas. People worry about:

- ? *Will I be supported or savaged? Is my manager skilled enough to give me feedback I can take?*
- ? *Will it be vague, personalising, judgmental or even-handed, specific and clear?*
- ? *Is this about controlling and monitoring me, or is it about really helping to foster my growth?*

And on the practical side, most people want to avoid the 'strain-and-drain' of having to deal with performance – difficult or otherwise. It's seen as time-wasting for both busy managers and staff, who feel the time invested is best spent on more important priorities – like getting work done. There's also a widespread sentiment, whether it's right or not, that good performers just get on and do it and don't need it, while poor one will never do it but get a lot of time lavished on them (*squeaky wheel syndrome*).

Finally on the process side, staff say they're sceptical because they've experienced instances time and time again, where managers promise support that doesn't eventuate or dwindles away; where agreed actions don't get followed though; or where there is no continuity and the process is fragmented, ad-hoc and sporadic, with ritual formal appraisal interviews once a year being the only time they get feedback.

Then there's a question of competency. Managers can feel out-of-their-depth. The conversation gets clumsy, uncomfortable for both parties, or it flounders and lacks meaning or direction. Leaders often feel under-prepared – especially with a difficult performance conversation – and they fear they're more likely say things that make things worse and raise more defensiveness. Let's face it – lots of us aren't all that crash-hot when it comes to conducting performance conversations.

- We run them as a tick-and-flick, compliance task we just want out of the way
- We monopolise the conversation and make it a one-sided affair
- We fail to delve-down and make performance conversations a richer experience

- ❑ We get staff off-side by putting things in negative ways rather than focus on the positive
- ❑ We say the wrong things that raise defensiveness and disable the discussion
- ❑ We talk-down to or make it unsafe for staff to engage in the process, because they feel blamed, ticked-off or troubled by how the conversation's going

Real performance development isn't measurement frameworks, recording mechanisms or box-ticking. Nor is it just about control or correction, though again you can excuse many staff who see it as just that because that's the manner and spirit in which it's often done. It should also not be seen just as a disciplinary procedure for poor-performers or a process to make sure you're covered in case of potential litigation, but again that's the motive of many. So what's the replacement?

Real performance management is the continual rounds of regular performance coaching conversations leaders have with people as a natural part of the way you want to lead and they want to improve. Done well, it helps achieve goals, build skills and talent, aligns individual and organisational effort, keeps people on track and encourages performance and personal growth. For all the glitzy performance-review instrumentation and other corporate HR bling, nothing replaces a good relationship where people can sit down face-to-face and talk over what's going on.



And that's the coaching focus of **Positive Performance Conversations**. Whether you're dealing with performers who are great, good or troubling, the principles and tools we share in our clinic and the 100-page self-coaching guide that accompanies it, can help you prepare for meaningful conversations about performance and handle them with more confidence, delivering even touchy or sensitive feedback in positive, encouraging ways.

See our on-line [Course Calendar](#) for dates our public clinics are coming up in your area. And if you've a group of 10 or more, we're happy to come to you. Use our on-line [Enquiry](#) form or call **Bill Cropper** direct to discuss arrangements for an in-house clinic at a venue of your choice.

More on *Positive Performance Conversations* on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

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