PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT “DOS” AND “DON’T”

As the end of the year looms, so does the annual management task of delivering performance reviews. More than 70 million Americans go through this annual ritual, yet most of us dread both giving and receiving performance reviews.

Some people claim that the annual performance review is "one of the most frightening and degrading experiences in every employee's life." The good news: It doesn't have to be that way.

Delivering performance reviews effectively boils down to the art of delivering feedback.

Here are some "dos":

- Set the stage for a two-way conversation. Relieve tension and facilitate dialogue by communicating upfront your review process agenda. Let employees know they have input.
- Start by letting employees assess themselves. What are they most proud of, and what do they consider areas for development?
- Seize the opportunity to acknowledge what you like and appreciate about how the employee performs.
- Identify what success looks like for the coming year, give department/school objectives, etc. Create an employee development plan with specific goals and tasks.
- Focus on the employee. Be truly present. Listen and make a genuine attempt to understand concerns and any feedback.
- Talk about their strengths and challenge areas. Deliver the negative (avoid sugarcoating) but make sure the employee knows what he or she can do about it.

Here are some “don’t”:  

- Talk too much. Reviews should be interactive. Don't let whatever "form" you use dictate your process; it's not about the form. If you are doing all the talking, you've probably lost them.
- Make it personal. Stick to behavior specifics.
- Offer challenging feedback using generalizations. Many clients tell me they are told during their reviews that they need to improve areas such as "communication." Most people have no idea what this means. Identify how you and the employee will know if he or she meets your expectations for improvement.
- Make assumptions about how the employee is receiving the feedback. Emotionally charged situations often foster misunderstanding. Probe for understanding and reactions, including confirmation of critical elements of the review.
- Avoid the negatives. We all have room for improvement. Even the most talented individuals want to know how they can reach the next level. Refusing to identify issues, challenge for improvement or hold the individual accountable does not foster growth. When you avoid giving tough, direct feedback, you aren't doing them (or you) any favors.
- Hammer on negatives. Don't shred personal self-esteem by telling them every negative thing you've ever noticed. Reinforce that it is behaviors and actions you want changed, and that you have confidence in the person you are challenging.

An organization's most valuable resource is its people. The best leaders understand that personnel require both acknowledgment and challenge -- and that skillfully developed and delivered performance reviews can be a highly effective management tool.