

Have No Fear, Honest Feedback Is Here

Ten leaders are discussing Daniel, a division manager, during the company's annual talent review. *He's a nice guy. I like him. He's good.* Not a very in-depth evaluation of someone identified as a high-potential leader. After a few minutes, the leaders decide to suggest a management training course for him, and move on to discuss Maria, another manager.

That evening, the same 10 are at a company dinner, discussing their children. *My daughter is really smart, but I can't motivate her. My son lacks confidence. I'm thinking of sending him to martial arts classes to build self-esteem. My two children are so different. I have to always watch my oldest to keep him out of trouble.*

As parents, these 10 leaders have a keen understanding of individual differences and the need to adjust their parental actions accordingly. They are able to articulate strengths and weaknesses and to think about the developmental activities that will best

fit their child's needs.

But when it comes to talking about employees, the vocabulary comes up decidedly short. We know these leaders have the skills to talk about individual differences and think about appropriate action plans. So why aren't these nuanced observations being shared during talent or performance reviews?

The answer is pretty simple. Just listen to the excuses managers give for ducking openness. *If I tell the truth, my employee will get upset and take it out on me or co-workers. He'll lose motivation and the work won't get done. The employee will leave*

and I'll be blamed. They won't change anyway, so why bother? No other manager has been honest, so why should I?

We need more straight talk, but we also need a path to get there. Here are five ways to foster honest performance discussions:

1

EVALUATE PRIVATELY, SHARE IN A GROUP

A global manufacturing firm had binders full of succession plans with names to fill every

role. Yet when a role was open, the senior leaders felt none was right for the job. When pressed, the leaders could explain the shortcomings for each of the internal candidates. Yet none of this information had come out during years of daylong talent reviews. The talent-review process was modified so that each leader privately evaluated all of the managers at the level below—not just their own subordinates. The leaders then met as a group and looked at a chart showing where each manager was placed on the talent grid, often far apart. The discussion was rich and nuanced, resulting in a consensus about the manager's needs and potential.

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GET EVERYONE ON THE SAME PAGE

A group of leaders at an energy company were arguing about an employee's potential; some commented on his current great

2

performance, while others talked about future roles he could fill. The conversation was confusing because there is a difference between performance—the what and how of past accomplishments—vs. potential—what one can be in the future.

Before the next talent review, the leaders were provided with definitions of terms that frequently get confused. Performance. Potential. Readiness. The definitions were simple, single sentences, all fitting on one page. The leaders referred to this cheat sheet during the meeting and corrected each other during the discussion. The talent review meeting would end over an hour earlier than usual.

UNDERSTAND WHAT THE ROLE REQUIRES BEFORE YOU FILL IT

3

A global consumer products company had five general manager roles covering five large regions. One of the GM roles would find locations for new product introductions; another focused on improving money-losing locations. Yet even though the roles required different skills and experiences, the company had a his-

ADD DATA TO THE DISCUSSION

A life-sciences company had compiled over a decade of data about its individual leaders from leadership inventories, 360-degree assessments, employee engagement surveys and performance reviews. Yet the data were rarely used for discussions or decisions. Then the company hired a

4

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tory of creating succession plans for a generic GM role, promoting people regardless of their true skill set. Set up for failure, many did. After years of these revolving doors, the company implemented a process to better define the job's profile before discussing potential candidates. With this profile, the leaders could talk openly about who was a good fit for the role as it actually existed.

data analytics manager. She started incorporating data into talent review, succession and hiring discussions. Suddenly the talent discussions became more fact-based. Leaders couldn't claim that their subordinates were innovative thinkers or team-oriented unless they knew the data supported their claims.

EMPOWER EMPLOYEES TO PUSH FOR FEEDBACK

After years of cajoling leaders to provide honest feedback without success, a technology company tried a different tactic. They told employees that they were required to prepare development plans and that their bosses had participated in lengthy talent discussions about them. Employees were told to ask their manager directly about their strengths and development needs; managers who dodged the discussion or provided a superficial response were called out, formally and informally. Over a few years, this upward push drove managers to provide honest feedback. We are entering a new frontier in performance reviews, where some companies have already dropped them in lieu of more frequent manager-subordinate discussions. Expect millennials, with their penchant for open talk and their workforce number growing, to help drive this. Straight talk. Honest talk. Direct talk. It's the wave of the future. ●

5