

NEWS

Giving Employees Harsh Reviews with Empathy

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Christine Landis, founder of Peacock Parent in San Diego, once had an employee who was promoted from supervisor to manager due to her length of service at the company and her expertise in the field.

However, her subpar communication skills reflected poorly on the company, an online resource platform for parents. Landis had a one-on-one with the employee, showing her three examples of emails where she had spelled words incorrectly and made grammatical errors.

Though the conversation was not a positive one, everything worked out in the end.

“She understood the critique and was ready to improve,” Landis said. “We signed her up for a business writing course.”

Giving employees harsh reviews is never simple. However, it’s something that must be done to put the employee on the right track and protect the company.

“Most people are not mind readers,” said Bill Catlette, partner at business consultancy Contented Cow Partners and a former managing director of HR at FedEx. “Whether someone is succeeding or failing at various aspects of their job, they should have the benefit of some discussion about the matter,

particularly if significant consequence is in play. I would much rather have a difficult conversation with someone about their work performance than to have to tell them that today is their last day here. Those are bad days for everyone.”

Here’s how HR professionals and employers can conduct harsh reviews in a productive way that will, hopefully, lead to positive outcomes for the employee, the team and the entire company.

Build Trust with Your Team

Employers should actively work on strengthening relationships and trust with their employees so when a harsh review is necessary, it goes more smoothly, according to Tawny Lott Rodriguez, director of human resources at Rowland Hall, an independent school in Utah with 280 employees.

“Building trust is key,” Rodriguez said. “Honest feedback is critical, but it lands better on fertile ground. Throughout the year, I strive to build trusting relationships with my team members through regular check-ins, open communication and recognition of their achievements. This trust becomes the foundation for a more challenging conversation.”

Show the Employee You Care

At DeVry University, which has more than 1,300 employees and campuses throughout the United States, Vice President of Human Resources Beth Hanson often has to engage in difficult conversations with employees.

“[They] are never easy, but they are necessary,” she said. “It’s important to approach discussions with empathy and be mindful of how your employees and the collective organization feels.”

To prepare for these conversations, Hanson determines exactly what she wants to talk about with the employee. She then considers the relationship she has with the employee “and the emotional landscape,” she said. “We have to first understand where the individual may be coming from, with the ultimate goal of getting on the same page.”

Hanson always leads with compassion and recommends that other leaders do the same.

“Acknowledge that feedback can be difficult,” she said, “but that you are there to support them along the way.”

Be Direct with Your Employees

While some employers may sandwich a harsh review with compliments, Landis argues that this approach can be confusing to employees. She prefers to be direct.

“Don’t beat around the bush,” she said. “State the problem within the first sentence, then ask the employee if they understand the issue. Then explain the solutions or PIP [performance improvement plan] that may follow.”

Rodriguez is on a similar page. She believes that sugarcoating issues delays improvement.

“If an employee isn’t aware of areas needing development, they can’t address them,” she said. “Honest feedback allows them to take ownership of their performance and take steps to excel.”

Additionally, in Rodriguez’s eyes, honesty builds trust.

“Employees who feel like they’re being misled or kept in the dark quickly become disengaged,” she said. “Open communication fosters trust and respect, which are essential for a positive and productive work environment.”

Time It Properly

When preparing for a harsh review, make sure that it happens at a time of day that is optimal for both parties.

“A hangry employee might not be as receptive to feedback,” Rodriguez said. “Scheduling the conversation for midmorning or after lunch ensures everyone is focused and well-fueled for the discussion.”

Create a Performance Improvement Plan

Along with timing the review properly, Rodriguez comes up with PIPs for employees so they know what steps they can take to improve. When one employee wasn’t performing well as a supervisor, Rodriguez initiated a PIP for this individual that included a leadership and communication course.

“This course provided the supervisor with the tools and strategies to effectively communicate and build a positive team dynamic,” she said. “The results were truly remarkable. Within a short time frame, the supervisor implemented the learnings from the course. Feedback from the team completely shifted. Employees reported a positive change in his leadership style, praising his improved communication and collaborative approach.”

Use Termination as a Last Resort

There is no fixed rule when it comes to terminating an employee. However, if employers have conducted a comprehensive review and laid out the plan for improvement—and the employee isn’t following through—then termination might be the only option.

“The rule of thumb I’ve used, and encouraged others to follow, involves making a value judgment as to whether or not the individual is willing/able to change in a reasonable period of time, and whether the deficiency is sufficiently serious to warrant termination,” Catlette said. “When the needle moves to the point where it’s evident that they either can’t or won’t change sufficiently, and where others [like] customers, co-workers and the general public are being ill-served, it’s time to make a change.”

Transforming Harsh Reviews into Positive Results

Many times, harsh reviews can lead to an encouraging change in the workplace. For example, take the supervisor that Rodriguez worked with; after following through with a PIP and working hard to improve, he put himself on the right track and contributed to the overall success of his organization.

“Within a year, this supervisor, having addressed his communication issues, earned a well-deserved promotion,” Rodriguez said. “This experience solidified my belief in the power of honest feedback for driving positive change.”