

# 5 Ways to Improve Employee Performance Conversations



## Introduction

Do you dread having performance conversations with your employees? You're not alone. In a recent article, "The Top 50 Problems With Performance Appraisals," Dr. John Sullivan notes, "In conversations with HR leaders and employees, the talent management process that suffers from the most disdain around the world is the performance appraisal. It's one of the few processes that even the owners of the process dread."<sup>1</sup> There are many things that can go wrong in a performance review including:

- **Incomplete performance assessment**
- **Lack of feedback or acknowledgement**
- **Assessment too subjective, not backed by data**
- **Conclusions don't match the facts**
- **No goals or process identified for moving forward**
- **Degraded employee morale and performance**

You can, on the other hand, improve outcomes, buy-in and accountability by having successful performance conversations with your employees. The most successful conversations are a win-win for both manager and employee and involve clear communication, shared understanding and a mutually agreed path for going forward. Here are some guidelines for winning performance conversations.

<sup>1</sup>[The Top 50 Problems With Performance Appraisals](#), Dr. John Sullivan, TLNT.com, 1/31/2011

## #1 Build Reassurance into the Conversation

The performance conversation starts by ensuring both you and the other person are ready and open to have a productive conversation. This cannot happen if the participants are not reassured that it is a safe place to talk. The stress of the situation can be managed by how the topic is introduced. The "3 P's" are an effective way to start the conversation as it can set the other person at ease in terms of where the conversation is intended to go.

## Build Reassurance

- Seek Permission
- Focus on purpose and goals
- Outline the purpose

## Be Clear

- Share what you are observing
- Explain your perception
- Describe the impact

## Listen

- Utilize Supportive Listening Skills
- Remain open to other perspectives
- Gain shared understanding

## Explore Alternatives

- Share possibilities
- Select options
- Negotiate go-forward actions

## Confirm Accountability

- Establish commitments
- Define follow up

- Ask for **permission**  
*"Could I have a conversation this week about how your work is going?"*
- Determine best time and place  
*"Would Tuesday at 2:00 in the private meeting room work for you?"*
- Eliminate distractions  
 How will you manage interruptions (people, phones, emails, etc.)?
- Establish clear goals and **purpose**  
*"My goal is to support you so you can be effective in fulfilling the requirements of your role and can meet our collective goals."*
- Describe the **process**  
*"Let's talk about what's working, the challenges you're facing and a plan to address those challenges."*

## #2 Be Clear - Set the Stage for Clarification

### Start with what you are observing

Be clear about the facts that demonstrate what you observed. It is important that you provide the feedback on what you observed as close to the event as possible. Feedback that is provided long after when the event occurred is not as effective, as the individual is not likely to recall the situation.

You may want to check your observation out (see below) before you make your perception and inference known to the other person. This can be advantageous as you gain more information that may shift your perception.

### Describe your perception

Consider the following scenarios: an individual who arrives at your toolbox meeting, slumps back in his chair and gazes at the ceiling may be perceived to be disinterested or uncommitted. Alternatively, a manager who continues writing when you arrive at his desk to ask a question presents the message... "I have no time for you."

An important part of the performance conversation is ensuring that we clearly understand and accurately interpret the actions of others.

This is called perception checking. Perception checking involves describing what you feel to be the other's inner state in order to check whether or not you understand what that person feels. For instance, "You look like you were hurt by my comments. Were you?" or "I get the impression you'd like to change the subject. Is that accurate?"

A good perception check conveys the message, "I want to understand your feelings." Describing feelings is a way to check whether you understand what the other person feels.

In the performance conversation it is important to make clear to the other person that your perception is based on what you have observed. It is important to be as direct as possible as to what your inference is.

### State the impact

It is important for the behaviour that is described and perception that follows your observation to be linked to the impact it has on the performance of the individual in his or her role. This addresses the "Why is this important" question that needs to accompany the feedback being provided. It also helps separate the person from the problem and helps focus the conversation to goals and priorities in the work being done.

**"Here is what I am seeing. When you..."** Describe the specific behavior without judgment.

**"My perception is..."** Describe your perception linking it to specific observable behaviours.

**"The implications of this are..."** Tell how the behavior impacts the situation, your perception and the individual's role.



### #3 Listen - Pause to Allow for a Response

**“So tell me what is going on”**

**“What is your perspective on this”**

At this point in the conversation, there is a requirement to stop and let the other person provide his or her perspective on what has been said. It is important to use your supportive listening skills to gain shared understanding of what really has occurred.

As the supervisor, you need to be open to alternate views of the situation and prepared to work toward full understanding of what’s really going on. To achieve this, be truly curious and focus on using open-ended questions.



The old adage of “a problem well defined and understood is half solved” is true and shared understanding sets the stage for an openness to think forward and improve the performance. It also starts to build accountability and commitment to solutions that are identified.

### #4 Explore Alternatives

When you begin to define the path forward with the other individual, it is critical to start by asking, “What do you think should be done?” This is important as it sets the stage for accountability because people are more likely to take responsibility for actions they define themselves.

This does not mean your requirements for what needs to be accomplished are neglected. Share your thoughts when and if the other person does not identify them. As a result, the path forward becomes a mutual conversation about what is really important.

When the determination of ideas and actions has been exhausted, the conversation needs to shift to the “go forward actions that can be agreed to.” Here again it builds accountability when the other individual identifies the plan.

### #5 Confirm Accountability

At the close of the performance conversation, as the supervisor, you should look for commitment to the shift in behaviour and the action plan to achieve it. This is best expressed by the other individual, not the supervisor. It should include:

- **The performance expectations**
- **Timing**
- **Support requirements**

It is also important to identify when follow-up monitoring will occur. Behaviour is most likely to shift when follow up is identified.

## Self-Assessment and Action Plan:

### Understanding and Utilizing the Performance Conversation Skills

In the table on the next page, assess where you are right now.

Ultimately, the goal is to gain proficiency in each of the Supportive Conversations skill areas. If you or your team needs help with these skills, contact KESA to learn more about our Performance Conversations Training. We will use your self-assessment to identify areas of need and emphasize them in your training program.

Put a check mark in the box that identifies your current self-assessment based on the following criteria:

**GOT  
IT**



I have enough information to do this.

**NEED  
MORE**



I basically understand, but need more.

**DON'T  
HAVE IT**



I'm not at all confident of my current knowledge.

**SUMMARY  
FOR ACTION  
PLAN**



Satisfied, confident, ready to go with this item.



Want to include this in my action plan steps.

## Things I Need To Do

GOT IT

NEED MORE

DON'T HAVE IT

SUMMARY FOR ACTION PLAN

Build Reassurance into the Conversation





Seek Permission





Establish Purpose





Define the Process





Set the Stage for Clarification





Describe Behaviours





State your Perception





Define the Impact





Pause to Allow for a Response





Use Supportive Listening Skills





Remain Receptive to Other Perspectives





Be Curious





Explore Alternatives & Negotiate Go-Forward Actions





Share Options for Resolving the Situation (Listen First)





Describe Alternatives You Want Considered





Build Accountability and Commitment





Confirm Commitments





Define Follow Up

## In Conclusion

You can improve performance conversations with any employee by building reassurance, being clear, listening, exploring alternatives and confirming accountability. Accountability by both parties in the conversation establishes a sense of purpose and trust. A successful performance conversation is a win-win, allowing you and your employees to gain a better understanding of expectations and processes and to set goals for improvement. Self-assessment is a good first step toward improving your conversations and reaping the benefits from a more productive and accountable team.

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To see how Kesa can help your organization, get in touch! [info@kesa.ca](mailto:info@kesa.ca)

**Alberta Office**  
10619-102 Ave  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T5J 2Z3  
**780.426.7776**