

Don't Manage Performance. Enable It.

I've worked for all kinds of managers in my career, from nurturers to narcissists and everything in between. And I've taken the lessons I've learned about being managed to heart, using those lessons as a guide to try to understand what works – what makes a difference and has impact – when leading teams today.

And today is a very different work world than the past. Gone are the days of management-by-dictator-decree, when employees were content to simply show up and do what they were told. Economic unpredictability, technology-powered transparency and non-stop mobility are the hallmarks of the global workplace, completely upending management best practices as we've known them. The old rules don't apply, which means managers today need to embrace a more modern paradigm for leadership if they're looking for the results that come from engaged employees and empowered teams.

Let's start with performance management, and the much-discussed legacy management practice of annual performance reviews. I have a vivid recall of my first performance review experience. I was working for someone much closer to the narcissist end of the leadership spectrum than a nurturer, and my scheduled performance review date arrived exactly one day after a grueling business week for my manager. Nonstop business travel, a contentious issue with a client and a full-out competitive war over a prospect's RFP had left her ragged and drained. Given her exhaustion-fueled crankiness, I was reluctant to engage in ANY conversations with her that week, let alone one about my own performance that year. And when the scheduled hour for our chat arrived, I walked into her office with butterflies in my stomach and a sense of blind, impending doom. She hadn't said much of anything to me about my performance all year, other than an occasional "good job" or "not what I was looking for", depending on the project. How was she going to synthesize her perspective on all the projects I'd worked on into one review conversation?

As it turned out, there was no “synthesized perspective” to be shared. My annual performance review, conducted by an exhausted business leader on a really bad day, was not a review of my work over the course of the year at all. It was a review of my work over the course of the past month only - leading up to the big RFP she’d been travelling for that previous week. She commended my contributions to getting the RFP done and my willingness to work the long hours and my ability to collaborate well with the team – all feedback I was grateful for. She then told me what the standard company raise was for that year and that I’d see it reflected in my next paycheck.

But I was ambitious, looking to get promoted, and I wanted to know what additional skills I needed to demonstrate to advance my career in the year ahead. She told me she’d “have a think” about that and get back to me. I asked her if there was an opportunity to get a pay increase beyond the standard merit raise percentage, and she said yes, but only when someone got promoted. So again, I asked her about the specific skills I’d need to demonstrate to be on track for a promotion, and she demurred. I left her office feeling rattled, unsure of myself, and unclear if I was on track to advance within this company or not.

Less than a year later, I left. On my last day, my boss wished me well and told me she was sorry to see me go, saying she’d hoped I was going to be there “for the long haul,” because she said she “saw great things for me” at the company if I stayed. I thanked her for the well-wishes, but I walked out wondering why those sentiments hadn’t been any part of our discussion during my annual performance review.

Looking back now on my that first year in the workforce, I understand my first boss better. The company we worked for didn’t provided her with any real management tools or guidance on how to coach or train or continuously engage the people on her team. And she traveled a lot – all in the time before connected devices and mobile cloud-based services - so she was in no position to provide any kind of real-time feedback on-the-go. So at review time, she was left with not

much more than her own most recent recall of each team member to guide her through conducting annual performance reviews. I'm sure it was as uncomfortable an experience for her as it was for each member of her team...

I know she's retired now, and I wonder if she looks at today's workforce and envies the technologies and tools and workforce research all available to managers today to make sure we do a better job enabling our teams to succeed. Or does she wonder how on earth some of us aren't using these tools now - the ones she never had - to make us better managers today? Because there's really no excuse to manage today like my first boss did back a few decades ago. The working world has changed, and workers expect their managers to empower their teams to succeed. It's not about managing their performance. It's about enabling it. That's the modern paradigm of successful leadership today, and it's the future of talent management.

Julie Zadow

TalentFirst Chief Marketing Officer