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How to React to Appraisals

By Dr. Kathleen Begley
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Note to Readers: *This free e-newsletter, sent only upon request, comes from Dr. Kathleen Begley, owner of Write Company Plus communications training. She writes weekly on topics connected to business and personal success. Dr. Begley also does a blog called "Meandering to a Different Drummer." Click onto the website address at the end of this article to read her musings on life, death, and how to dress for a cruise..*

I never had a formal performance appraisal. I became self-employed as a communications trainer 20 years ago just as the annual feedback craze took off. The closest I've come to a review is having me tell myself that I'm a heck of a public speaker. During the past dozen years, however, in working with thousands of business professionals all across the country, I have met more than a few women and men deeply upset about negative appraisals.

Wait, a second. I'm falling into corporatespeak here. What I'm really talking about are lousy report cards, often given by individuals with less than stellar skills, credentials and motives themselves. Ask psychologists about the proper way to comment on people's life's work and they'll tell you to tread carefully -- very, very, very carefully. As you can gauge just by news reports on the number of people who drink heavily, get divorces, and become violent after losing jobs, many people define themselves by their daily labor.

That's the bad news about professional report cards. The good news is that there's a move afoot to do away with them.

"You can call me dense, you can call me iconoclastic, but I see nothing constructive in an annual pay and performance review," writes Samuel A. Culbert, a professor at the Anderson School of Management at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). "It's a mainstream practice that has baffled me for years. To my way of thinking, a one-side-accountable, boss-administered review is little more than dysfunctional pretense. It's a negative to corporate performance, an obstacle to straight-talk relationships, and a prime cause of low morale at work." Dr. Culbert, I love you.

So how can bosses talk about employee behavior in a more positive way? Right at the moment it occurs, according to Carol Bartz, CEO of Yahoo. "I have the puppy theory," Bartz said recently in an interview with the Wall Street Journal. "When the puppy pees on the carpet, you say something right then and there. You certainly don't tell a puppy six months later, 'Remember that time when you peed on the carpet?' That just doesn't make any sense."

So what should you do if your organization hasn't yet caught on that annual report cards cause more problems than they solve? Here are some tips on approaching your review from a variety of sources, including a book titled "How Consistent are Performance Review Criteria" by Peter Gwynne.

Lighten up. Remember only life and death are life and death. Even if you get a horrendous evaluation, the worst that can happen is that you lose your job after your employer has built a paper case against you. So what? As millions of unemployed people currently can attest, you'll survive and, in all likelihood, eventually find a job you're better suited for.

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Show up armed and ready. Every Friday during the year, list your accomplishment for the week. Before your evaluation, refresh your memory about all the wonderful time-and money-saving actions you took since your last review. Wow your boss with the sheer volume of your efforts.

Ask for specifics. Let's say your manager claims that your attitude has become negative. Press him or her for the exact reasons behind that opinion, such as your being observed using a surly tone of voice or rolling your eyeballs. Then get times and dates. If your boss is forthcoming with the information, propose working together on a plan to help you change.

Determine evaluation rules. In some organizations, managers are required to rate most people in the middle category -- not excellent, not horrendous. Therefore, if that's where you happen to fall, I suggest you refrain from taking the rating so personally. Your mother and I both know you're far above average.

Hide your anger. In my long career, I have never heard of a single individual winning points for going off on a tirade in a work setting. Save the epithets to share with family and friends.

Appeal to a higher power. No, I don't mean God, though a quick prayer may help you cope emotionally with a damaging evaluation. Most organizations have channels to disagree with your review. But be careful. Arguing openly is unlikely to endear you to the boss. Weigh the benefits versus the costs before proceeding.

Wait it out. Remember that the tide of business opinion is rising against performance reviews. Another indication is this statement made in a recent issue of BusinessWeek magazine by Jeffrey Pfeffer, professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University's Graduate School of Business. "Managers don't like doing appraisals. Employees don't like getting them. Perhaps that's because they all suspect what the evidence shows: Performance reviews don't work." Aren't I fortunate to have escaped them?

Dr. Kathleen Begley has written seven books and gives corporate seminars on topics such as writing persuasively, presenting confidently, and managing positively. You can call her at 610-429-1562 or e-mail her at KBegley@writecompanyplus.com. She responds to everybody.