The Psychology of Building Trust In The Performance Review Process



Trust is an important component of the relationship building between an employee and their employer. When employees trust leadership and the people around them they are often able to spend more time and energy focussed on doing their best work.

There are many opportunities to earn and hold an employees trust in the workplace. One of the most precarious times for shaping trust can be during the performance review process. Done well the performance review process can help an employee and the organization improve performance. Done poorly the performance review process can damage the relationship between an employee and the organization and result in reducing employee motivation and performance.

Ideally the organizations goal of a performance review is to assess and provide feedback regarding an employee's past performance and set goals for the employee's future performance. Employees are primarily looking for positive reinforcement and feedback on their standing in the organization including what they need to do to progress towards a future career path. However, if an employee does not understand the process or believe the process or person offering the performance review is fair the process will be much more challenging.

Cognitive Bias And The Performance Review

An effective performance review process does allow a supervisor to provide both positive and corrective feedback designed to boost future performance. Delivered properly both positive and corrective feedback is useful in the development of an employee. Often, however, the performance review process turns out to be both uncomfortable and unproductive as the positive feedback is overshadowed by anticipation of or the actual negative information.

We humans still have many cognitive biases, developed over eons. One such cognitive bias is the negative cognitive bias that translates into being primed to attend to negative information that could signal danger. Danger in a workplace setting often comes in the form of negative feedback related to job performance. As the performance review process nears and then arrives most people's senses perk up and they become more alert to signs of danger, even when they intellectually know they have little to fear. This alertness can make them more likely to anticipate danger and this may lead to stress and anxiety that can impact workplace relationships and performance. The more trust an employee has in the process and in the supervisor the more likely it is

the performance review will be positive and the less likely there is to be any collateral performance damage.

By understanding and taking steps to address the psychological side of the performance review process you can build in checks and balances that improve the way performance reviews are conducted and received.

3 Ways to Use Psychology to Improve the Performance Review Process

- **Desensitization: Make performance reviews part of the norm**: One key way to desensitize someone to danger is to repeatedly expose him/her to that danger.**Action:** Make performance reviews an ongoing aspect of communication between an employee and supervisor by establishing regular performance feedback, monthly meetings and quarterly performance reviews and calling them such.

  Making something part of the routine generally lessons the anticipation and fear. As a result of our negativity bias even when the previous years performance review was 95% positive and only 5% corrective the odds are that the employee will best recall the 5% negative information. However, it will be imperative that this ongoing performance review process is managed properly or the result will be employees who are always anticipating the next shoe drop.

- **Transparency: Make the process clear and understandable.** Transparency generally builds trust and reduces fear. When employees do not understand the process including what, when and how their performance is being measured they remain on alert.**Action:** Communicate clearly and frequently information about performance expectations and provide example of tangible performance feedback. While an employee is working on a task and at the completion of the task the supervisor can provide brief and basic verbal or written feedback of what is being measured and how it is being measured. This immediately gives the employee information.

  Using performance review software is one way to manage this but if it is not available produce a simple goals sheet or performance review notes file the employee has access to. When a supervisor makes a performance note the supervisor can inform the employee that a note is available to discuss regarding their performance.

- **Perspective: Broaden the perspective through collaboration**: Supervisors come to the table with their own perspective and bias and this can significantly impact their objectivity during the review and feedback process. This applies to situations where they have either a positive or less than positive view of an employee. A performance review process that does not relay on one primary person can help instil more trust in the process on the part of the employee.**Action:** Build collaboration into the performance review process by enabling the supervisor to consult with others who may have a different experience and perspective on the employee’s performance. This could include other supervisors, managers, HR and even co-workers. This collaboration should be applied to both the information gathering process and the review process. When possible expose employees to other supervisors or managers to enable this process.

  Additionally, even if there is little exposure to another performance reviewer involve a second or neutral perspective by having supervisors discuss their feedback with HR, a manager or another supervisor on an ongoing basis. This can help make the process more objective.

Done well a performance review process can improve trust in the workplace while at the same time providing information and feedback to help improve employee performance that supports the ongoing success of the organization.