

# **Conversations, Not Evaluations: An Alternative Model of Performance Management**

By

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*Traditional appraisal and evaluation systems focus almost exclusively on an employee's past performance. The desired result in each of these systems is better work performance. The very nature of most appraisals or evaluations, however, may inhibit performance unintentionally by focusing energy, attention, and effort on past shortcomings rather than future successes. An alternative form of evaluation, now in use at Bates College, is designed to foster a genuine, open dialogue between the employee and the supervisor. Through this process, called the Conversations Document, employees and supervisors work together to find solutions to performance challenges.*

## **Traditional Performance Management Systems**

Probably the most common element of performance management systems is a feedback session in which a supervisor provides information to the employee about the quality of the employee's contributions during the prior evaluation period. These sessions often are characterized by one-way communication in which the supervisor describes how well the individual met or failed to meet performance standards. The manager's description of performance usually is tied to the individual's pay and also impacts the individual's opportunities for advancement.

The employee usually is not encouraged to respond meaningfully or candidly to the manager's judgments. When the feedback is negative, the individual's response can be perceived as defensive. In fact, in many systems, the employee's response is called a "rebuttal." In other performance management systems, the individual's signature on the performance appraisal instrument indicates that he or she has received the appraisal, but does not signify agreement with the manager's judgment or evaluation. In either case, these feedback sessions are not designed to encourage a dialogue about the employee's past,

present, or future performance. This is a fundamental problem with most performance management systems.

Another problem with most systems is that they are unnecessarily past-oriented. They serve to give employees a report card of prior performance and behavior. A great sense of anxiety almost always exists within such systems because rewards, recognition, and pay are normally tied to the outcome of an individual's "report card." Focusing attention on the past causes the individual and the supervisor to dwell on things that cannot be changed. Because many performance management systems ask the individual being evaluated to conduct a self-appraisal prior to meeting with the supervisor, most employees spend the hours and days prior to an appraisal session reflecting on the past. Managers, too, look back over the employee's performance during the evaluation period as they prepare for the meeting. Unfortunately, managers are likely to pay more attention to past mistakes than to past successes because managers are trained to focus their attention on the gaps between performance expectations and actual performance (Langdon, 2002; Green, 1999). This approach siphons attention away from improving future performance—the very goal the system tries to achieve. As Henderson (1997) writes, "Although the performance appraisal is conducted primarily to rate employee performance, its ultimate purpose is to direct the efforts of all employees toward the achievement of organizational objectives and goals."

In short, most performance management systems do not encourage the communication necessary to identify performance problems or to determine the conditions necessary to improve the situation. A more enlightened approach to performance management is to place the vast majority of effort and attention on developmental activities that strengthen future performance, rather than on rating the quality and quantity of past performance. A program in place at Bates College attempts to separate past efforts from potential contributions. This is achieved through dialogue that focuses employee and supervisor efforts on setting and achieving shared goals. As Coens and Jenkins (2002) observed, "We spend endless hours conducting quarterly or annual individual feedback sessions... The practice of *dialogue* has justifiably garnered great attention in the business press, and, if it is properly conducted, yields powerful results."

**The Conversations Document** Effective supervision coupled with open, frank, and honest dialogue should result in acceptable performance; declining performance is prevented when performance issues are openly and frequently discussed. Periodic opportunities to step back from the details of daily, weekly, and monthly efforts and focus on shared institutional goals are necessary in any performance management system. These ends can better be achieved through a formal system of dialogue, rather than through a traditional evaluation system. A quasi-performance management system in place at Bates College, called the Conversations Document, can serve as a model for collaboration between employees and their supervisors.

The Conversations Document and process were designed to address the strategic and developmental purposes of performance management without the administrative elements found in most appraisal systems. At first glance, critics might question the legitimacy of a performance management process that does not contain certain administrative elements, namely evaluation or appraisal. A deeper analysis will support the notion that evaluation is only one element of a larger process, and that a true performance “management” system can be useful without a purely evaluative component. The Conversations Document process is intentionally biased toward future performance; it focuses upon performance alignment and performance improvement regardless of how well or how poorly an employee is currently performing or has performed.

The Conversations Document process is largely the brainchild of Don Harward, the past president of Bates College. The process was created and implemented in 1996 and was substantially revised in 2000. The distinguishing characteristic of this process is a dialogue (feedback) session between an individual and his or her supervisor. Each session provides for a two-way exchange of information or dialogue, hence the name. Although the supervisor directs this process, the employee is a full participant. Therefore, employees cannot sit passively as recipients of feedback, but instead must engage in

collaborative dialogue with their supervisors. Together employees and supervisors can more effectively diagnose problems and produce joint solutions to performance challenges.

The core aim of the Conversations Document process is to ensure that the employee and his or her supervisor are talking about the work that must be performed to ensure success. Managers are trained to focus on solving problems and removing obstacles. These discussions typically include dialogue about the work environment itself, coworkers, the department, the college, and any aspect of employment matters that can have an effect on good performance. The employee involved usually has valuable information about the drawbacks of the work environment; the dialogue process cultivates the employee's ideas and input. The underlying goal of these conversations is to create the right environment or context for good performance to occur. The key component is dialogue—conversations, not evaluations.

The guiding principles that govern this process are: 1) Shared Vision for the College, 2) Shared Objectives, 3) Individual Responsibilities and Achievements, and 4) Shared Responsibilities and Achievements. These principles direct the supervisor and the employee to work together toward common goals. The language written on the actual performance management instrument provides a good description of the process:

The purpose of this document is to facilitate meaningful conversations about our work. The focus of such conversations should be improving the quality of our work and work environment.

The intent of this process is to ensure we focus and align our collective efforts toward supporting the mission and goals of the College. In doing so, we must appreciate how our individual contributions affect the attainment of our department's and the College's goals.

A Conversations Document meeting requires that there be *two-way communication* about the work to be performed. Individuals and their supervisors should engage in meaningful conversations about the individual's work and how it is connected to the work of others. It is a forward-looking document and process, which involves an

assessment of the status quo while emphasizing growth, improvement, and continuous movement toward shared objectives.

Conversations Document meetings should be planned, should occur periodically, and can be initiated by employees or their supervisors. During such meetings employees should be prepared to discuss their work needs and concerns, to make suggestions about improving their work or work environment, as well as to discuss how their contributions have and will affect the College and others. The ultimate goal of these meetings is to reach agreement on the work that is to be performed, as well as plans to reach those objectives.

The process attempts to meet the strategic and developmental purposes of normal performance management systems with little attention on the administrative purpose, namely evaluation.

Nonetheless, managers are encouraged in Conversations Document training to provide some assessment of the employee's current contributions, as this assessment is necessary to establish expectations for future performance. This assessment is not a report card as much as it is an acknowledgement of the status quo. Therefore, regardless of whether the performance is adequate, inadequate, good, or great, a disproportionate amount of attention is placed on improvement, instead of corrections or remediation. This subtle but profound shift in perspective creates a new paradigm—a performance management process that is positive in nature and optimistic in tenor.

Any assessment in the Conversations Document process is intended to be less than 10 to 15 percent of the focus, so that the vast majority of the process is forward-looking and improvement-oriented. Attention and effort are shifted away from investing more time and resources in identifying and correcting weaknesses and toward identifying ways in which the employee can make positive contributions.

Another key component of the Conversations Document process is that it seeks to direct the collective efforts of the employee and the employee's supervisor toward achieving organizational goals—

the Shared Objectives principle of the process. This aspiration is consistent with the strategic purpose found in most performance management systems. It also provides context for the work being performed and informs the employee of why the employee's contributions are important.

### **Challenges and Successes**

The Conversations Document process has met with mixed success at Bates College, but it is gaining acceptance and popularity. The probable cause for its emerging success is that the fundamental premise for the process is irrefutable. The individual and his or her supervisor engage in frequent dialogue about common interests and their work together; they also share the responsibility for ensuring their objectives are met. This communication and collaboration form a recipe for success.

Yet some managers are uncomfortable with the process of directing and managing employee performance without the inherent power of reward or punishment associated with traditional performance appraisal systems. Other managers are uncomfortable with the expectation that employees will provide them with some feedback during the Conversations Document process. When managers embrace the concept of receiving employee feedback, however, they become aware of their actions that have helped, or unintentionally limited, the performance of their subordinates.

Individual employees are free to inform their supervisor of people, processes, or things that prevent them from reaching optimal performance. The beauty of the Conversations Document process is that the individual employee is involved in helping to identify and eliminate performance challenges. The individual is free, furthermore, to give an honest self-assessment, as candor will not be used against the employee to award or deny raises or promotions.

Fortunately, some managers are eager to discuss the obstacles that stand between the individual and performance success. These managers revel in the opportunity to work with their employees to identify problems and discuss potential solutions. The dialogue is open, dynamic, and filled with candor. The result is most often richer in quality than a manager's assessment alone. This process makes

individuals and their supervisors partners in the success of the individual, their department, and the college. This is characteristic of the third guiding principle: Shared Responsibilities and Achievements.

The challenge facing the successful implementation and use of the Conversations Document process is its required paradigm shift. The notion that performance management should be purely positive and not at all punitive is not easily accepted—even though it seems obvious that combining negative reinforcement (not giving a raise or promotion) while simultaneously trying to motivate future performance is a flawed approach. Much has been written about the difficult task of delivering negative feedback with positive results. “A major component of a manager’s job is to feed that performance information back to employees in a way that results in improved performance rather than defensiveness and decreased motivation” (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart, and Wright, 2000). Predictably, employees often are less receptive to continued discussions and suggestions about future performance when they have been given negative feedback. Performance management systems work well when the feedback received is good, but such systems do not work as well when the feedback is bad.

For the Conversations Document process to fully realize success at Bates College and to have potential application at other institutions, it may be necessary to implement ongoing training for employees and supervisors. Training is particularly important for new employees and supervisors, as they must be educated in the process of performance management as it is practiced in a two-way communication system. Both parties must believe that open dialogue is essential to a successful working relationship and that there is always room for improvement.

### **Conversations and Evaluations**

Rethinking evaluations in favor of a process that relies upon and requires frank dialogue between managers and employees to identify problems and find joint solutions has the potential of revolutionizing how Bates College and other institutions view performance management. This new way of thinking stands in strong contrast to traditional evaluations that rely upon the manager’s assessment alone. The strongest argument for the merit of the Conversations Document’s design is that it contains all of the characteristics of an effective performance feedback process as set forth by Noe et al. (2000):

1. Feedback should be given frequently, not once a year.
2. Create the right context for the discussion.
3. Ask the employee to rate his (or her) performance before the session.
4. Encourage the subordinate to participate in the session.
5. Recognize effective performance through praise.
6. Focus on solving problems.
7. Focus feedback on behavior or results, not on the person.
8. Minimize criticism.
9. Agree to specific goals and set a date to review the process.

The Conversations Document process allows individuals to request a meeting in the absence of supervisor initiative. This feature ensures that discussions are held as often as is necessary. When coupled with day-to-day supervisory interaction, this feature meets criterion one from the effective feedback process noted above. The second criterion is addressed by the simple fact that this process expects dialogue, which helps to create an environment where good performance can occur.

Employees are required to participate in the Conversations Document process. Training sessions give employees tips and tools to help them prepare for a Conversations Document session. Preparation ensures that they enter the process fairly and with the expectation that they will participate and that their voice will be heard. As active participants, individuals must monitor their own performance and contributions. This participation and reflection meet the third and fourth criteria outlined above.

Elements five, six, and seven also are contained within the design and use of the Conversations Document process. Although the process does not specifically direct supervisors to praise performance, the emphasis on good performance is inherent. Supervisors are asked in training to talk about good performance and how this performance can be replicated. Presumably, in discussing good performance, it is duly recognized.

The Conversations Document process also encourages employees to discuss their work needs and concerns and to make suggestions about improving their work, or their working environment, consistent with the sixth criterion Noe et al. set forth. The Conversations Document process also focuses attention on the employee's performance within departmental and college-wide contexts, thereby avoiding critical personal feedback and addressing the seventh and eighth criterion. By design, the Conversations Document avoids unnecessary criticism, as the focus on past behavior is minimal.

The Conversations Document process demonstrates the final element of effective performance feedback systems, as well. As the document's purpose statement explains, "the ultimate goal of these meetings is to reach agreement on the work that is to be performed, as well as plans to reach those objectives."

### **Employee Discipline and Evaluations**

Although it is focused on improving future performance, the Conversations Document process does not advocate ignoring performance problems. Employees are held accountable through a complementary process of progressive discipline. Mediocre performance that does not rise to the level of progressive discipline is addressed through day-to-day supervision and through the developmental component found in the Conversations Document process. Employees are held accountable for their lack of performance and have been terminated from employment with Bates College through the progressive discipline process.

The practice of separating discipline from performance management is found in many other organizations, as well. When performance is substandard or spirals down, the employee is written up in the form of a letter generated to detail the specific shortcoming or infraction. This letter also includes a performance improvement plan tailored to the specific behavior or performance issue at hand and designed to resolve the situation and return the employee to satisfactory performance.

## Conclusion

The Conversations Document provides a forward-looking process for evaluating employee performance. Instead of drawing focus to past problems, the process engages both employee and supervisor in a meaningful dialogue that shapes expectations for future performance. By collaborating on goal-setting, the employee and the manager work together to find solutions to problems that may be impeding the employee's performance.

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