

How Managers Are Handling Performance Reviews During COVID-19

By Brian O'Connell

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As millions of Americans work remotely during the coronavirus pandemic, managers unaccustomed to supervising employees from afar face challenges in evaluating performance and providing good feedback.

"Most of the components of our performance reviews have been discarded during the coronavirus crisis," said Mike Falahee, chief executive officer at Marygrove Awning Co. in Livonia, Mich. "After all, how can we review someone who can't do their job the way they're accustomed to doing it?"

Shifting Tactics

No doubt, many company leaders share that sentiment as the world of work has changed swiftly in the past eight weeks. In that time, many companies have shifted to remote-only operations.

According to a Gallup survey, the percentage of workers who say their employer offered them flextime or remote-work options grew from 39 percent in mid-March to 57 percent by early April.

Additionally, 62 percent of employed Americans say they've "[worked from home during the crisis](#)," a number that has doubled since mid-March," according to Gallup.

Company leaders and managers say several strategies—some that were in place before the virus, some that are new—have helped them measure workforce production in the age of COVID-19.

Kerry Norman is vice president of talent solutions at CHG Software in Salt Lake City. Several years ago, CHG decided to ditch its traditional annual performance reviews for front-line employees.

"We found that it was ineffective for several reasons," Norman said. "First, it was a look backward, so it didn't help improve future performance. Second, it wasn't an effective measurement tool because assessments varied so greatly from one leader to the next. Third, it was disengaging for employees. It felt more like a judgment than a motivational tool."

Now the company focuses on providing "in-the-moment" feedback, and that has proved helpful during the virus.

"We want people to know what they're doing right and where they can improve, rather than waiting until the end of the year when it's too late to do anything about it," Norman said.

Shifting Roles

The pandemic is also forcing everyone at CHG, managers as well as their staff, to be more flexible. That means employees are taking on new roles, some for which they've never been trained. And managers must show flexibility when evaluating these workers, allowing time for a learning curve and understanding that there will be hiccups.

"Our people are now learning their skills can be used in ways they never knew existed, and they're helping in areas of the company that may have been foreign to them just weeks ago," Norman said.

Andres Lares is a managing partner at Shapiro Negotiations Institute in Baltimore. Before the virus hit, the company conducted formal reviews once a year. Now, Lares said, his firm's managers check in with workers weekly.

Moreover, his firm's managers have, for now, stopped evaluating employees based on the revenue they generate. Instead, he said, "we want to see our marketing team reach out to more people than ever via phone or e-mail during this time. In doing so, we're not emphasizing sales and revenue in the short term, but we are tracking demonstrated thought leadership from our employees that leads to more sales" in the future.

Adem Selita is chief executive officer at the Debt Relief Co. in New York City, which already had an automated performance system that tracked employees' metrics by the day, week, month and year.

With COVID-19 shaking up the company's office culture, that system has changed. These days, each performance review is scheduled more than a week in advance and employees are sent a template to fill out with instructions. Employees send back their responses for the manager to look over and use as a guide during the review.

"While time is still spent on going over output, the emphasis now is on what the employee needs help with, what they'd like to work on, ultimately with three takeaways the employee will focus on and discuss in the next review with their manager," Selita said.

Communication Challenges

Following this new performance review blueprint hasn't been easy during the pandemic.

"The biggest setback at first was communications," he said. "We're moving from a management culture where leaders are steps away from an employee's desk to a scenario where leadership isn't physically present. That leads to many questions not being asked [by the manager or employee] until it comes time for performance reviews."

On the upside, managers have noted new opportunities to discuss performance more broadly.

"With traditional performance reviews, employees were using much of their allotted time discussing small-ticket items, leaving them with little time to focus on development and what they can do better," Selita said. "By establishing more regular check-ins, we've found that employees are leaving sessions feeling more capable and motivated than ever."

Ken Eulo is a founding partner at Smith & Eulo Law Firm in Orlando, Fla. His firm has decided to push back performance reviews entirely during the coronavirus crisis.

"We believe it's unfair to hold employees to the same standards during this outbreak," he said. "The economy is suffering, and we are offering limited services as a firm. Consequently, we have completely halted performance reviews for the time being, as we can't find reasonable parameters to measure each employee's performance due to the circumstances."

Eulo said his firm will resume performance reviews when its services return to normal.

"For the time being, we are trusting employees to hold themselves accountable," he said.

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