

Managing Your IT Team

In leadership, Peter [Drucker]’s enormous contribution has been his insistence that leaders come in all shapes, sizes, races and genders, and that leadership is not some mysterious blend of charisma and luck. Rather, Peter has argued persuasively that leadership most commonly arises from a commitment to serve others rather than self. . .

—FREDERICK HARMON

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CHAPTER TWO

Even with the advanced functionality available in today's hardware and software, it's still the human factor that's the biggest influence on how effectively technology is put to use in your environment. The members of your IT team are the ones who will select, implement, configure, monitor, and manage the technology in your corporation.

The technology products in your environment (generally) behave in a fairly predictable manner, but people often don't. Managing a staff is an art, not a science.

The importance of managing a team can't be understated:

- ◆ Become a great manager and you've found a career path that will serve you well for the rest of your working life.
- ◆ Fail to manage well, and you'll be back in the non-managerial ranks soon enough.
- ◆ Become good at it, and it becomes your most valuable skill, and your staff becomes a critical component of the organization.
- ◆ Without good staff management skills, you'll see your department's goals and objectives become an uphill battle.

2.1 **Keeping Employees Focused**

IT Managers must set priorities clearly, explain the company and department mission, and communicate often with their team. Throughout this book, specific techniques are detailed to provide you with methods to accomplish these goals. In this section we will discuss the reasons why these goals must be pursued.

Establish Priorities

One of the most important, but often unnoticed, functions of a manager is to set priorities, such as allocating staffing and funding to various projects. Employees who spend months at a time working on a project often wonder what exactly it is that their manager does. In truth, the manager is doing one of the most important parts of his job by deciding *which* projects get worked on, *when* they need to start and finish, and *what* resources are assigned to them. A manager's real worth is in his ability to set goals and objectives and to set priorities and make decisions to achieve them.

Setting goals and priorities means managing your staff and your team so that their work reflects, as close as possible, your own priorities. A manager's merit is found in his staff's work. Of course, your decisions and priorities may be totally off base. Or they may be 100% on target. But if you fail to manage your staff well, the quality of your priorities will not matter: Your goals and objectives will never be realized anyway.

Communicate with Your Team

First and foremost, communicate your vision for the department to your staff. They should understand both where you want the department to go, and the plans you have for getting there. Both are important. You don't want to be the manager who makes the trains run on time, but doesn't know what to put in the freight cars. Similarly, you don't want to be the manager who goes on about the wonders of train travel but never gets the tracks laid.

The communication of your goals and priorities to your team is vital. The way you communicate with them will vary with a project's scope. A two-year project to implement an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) application will require different communication than managing a weekend effort to upgrade the company's database servers.

Here are some guidelines when communicating with your team.

Make Sure the Team Understands the Overall Objective and Goals

Explain it in practical terms; for example, "implementing a new accounts payable system might include eliminating all manual processes, thereby reducing turnaround time to 24 hours, and ensuring that no unauthorized payments are made."

Explain How You Envision Achieving the Goal

You don't have to offer too much detail, especially on a large project, but you should have some thoughts, visions, and ideas you can articulate as a type of road map. "Our first milestone is the end of February; by then we should have a prototype system for the users to look at. By mid-year we should have finalized all the details. We're looking to plan for parallel testing in the 4th quarter, with the final cut-over set for December 31st."

Encourage Questions and Input from Your Staff

There are several reasons why you should do this:

- ◆ Asking for your staff's input (and taking it seriously) will make your team feel like a part of the decision-making process; they will work better and harder on a process they feel a part of and understand.
- ◆ They are a lot closer to the work than you are — they'll be the first to recognize an opportunity, a potential landmine, or a dead end.
- ◆ The group will usually have important insight to share.

If the goal or plan is especially challenging, or perhaps it deviates somewhat from the norm, you'll have to be that much more motivating and excited when you communicate with the team.

Ask questions of the team to ensure that they have an appropriate understanding of the project. For example: How do you think we should start? Where do you see danger zones? What are the key milestones? What kinds of resources do you think we will need?

Listen Carefully

Notice the staff's comments, tone, and body language. Use these as clues to determine if your team is behind you. Make sure everyone feels free to air any doubts or concerns. One technique is to go around the table at the end of each meeting and to ask each member to express any concerns they have, and then address them accordingly. Another is to encourage the staff to send you e-mails or meet with you privately if they feel intimidated by speaking in front of a group.

Meet Regularly

Meeting frequencies might vary depending on the work at hand. Weekly and monthly meetings are common. During critical project times, it isn't uncommon to have daily meetings. You can have too many meetings or too few — it depends on the project. Try to establish a rhythm that people can work with; if you establish a meeting time of every Friday morning, the team will work throughout the week with that in mind.

Meetings don't have to always be project oriented. Regular department meetings, as well as individual meetings, with your direct reports can help foster a culture of open communication and sharing of information.

Project Meetings

Project meetings are a separate type of meeting that have both additional benefits and potential problems. See Chapter 4, Project Management (page 95), for a fuller discussion of project management.

Company Mission

Another method of keeping your employees focused is to clearly outline the company's mission, vision, and values. Defining and articulating these shouldn't be your responsibility as an IT Manager; someone else should do that for you (and the rest of the company). But once your company has agreed upon a mission statement, communicate it with your staff. Make it clear how this mission, and the vision statement that details how you are going to achieve that mission, directly affects the actions of every employee.

Company values are the final means you should use to keep your employees on the right track. If your company hasn't made its values clear, ask your management to do so. Again, defining and communicating values isn't your job; you can participate if a company-wide committee is formed, but you should not have to come up with these on your own. "Company values" are defined by the entire company and can be useful guides in determining employee behavior.

In addition to communicating the company's mission, goals, and values to your team, it's also vital that you share with them *the goals and values of the IT department*, objectives that should reflect both the company's mission and your own goals and values.

2.2 **Avoiding Burnout**

With IT so critical to today's organizations, the demands on the staff can be enormous. Glassy-eyed programmers, cases of Jolt soda, sleeping bags under desks, and 3 a.m. pizza deliveries have become routine.

IT demands are heavy because:

- ◆ Virtually every aspect of an organization is dependent on IT and its services.
- ◆ The tasks and their solutions are hard, complicated, and intense.
- ◆ In the digital world we now live in, the workplace is often 24/7, and the demands are non-stop. The technology allows people to work 24 hours a day, squeezing in time for sleep only when the body refuses to stay awake.
- ◆ The lure of a complex technical challenge often excites people to work 20 hours a day. (In the early days of developing the Macintosh, Steve Jobs handed out T-shirts that read: "Working 90 hours a week and loving it.")
- ◆ IT staff is needed during working hours to ensure systems are running as they should and responding to problems. However, the staff is also

needed during off-hours because that's often the only time that certain work (e.g., maintenance, upgrades, etc.) can be done.

- ◆ Unlike the days of assembly-line labor, the work of IT isn't measured in products produced per unit of time. So there are no clear external indicators of when the work is "complete." ("The IT job is one where you get an 'F' if you fail but only a 'C' if you succeed — this stuff is supposed to work, right?" Bill Gates, *Business @ the Speed of Thought*, p. 322.)
- ◆ Highly energized and motivated employees may not even realize the condition they are getting themselves into. While it may be tempting to push your staff, or allow them to push themselves to the limit, it's important to remember that you won't get much work out of them once they've hit that wall.

Be as Clear as Possible About Your Real Priorities

It takes more than just stating that something is a priority for everyone on a team to realize that it is a priority. If coding a specific interface is a critical task for a larger project, you have to say so. But also remember that your actions can dilute your words. If the status of the interface barely gets mentioned during staff meetings, or only one person is assigned to work on it part-time, even though you say it is a priority, you'll be sending mixed signals. You can demonstrate the task's importance by focusing on it during meetings, reallocating additional resources to it, sacrificing lesser priorities for it, and so on.

Make Your Employees Aware of the Dangers of Burnout

Often people most susceptible to burnout are the ones unaware of the problem. They work like dogs for two years and then they crash.

Outline the Prices Employees Can Pay

When making them aware of the problem, outline the cost of burnout:

- ◆ Deterioration of health
- ◆ Errors on the job
- ◆ Relationships with co-workers deteriorate
- ◆ Problems at home with family and with relationships
- ◆ Loss of job

The short-term gains for working weekends for two years in a row don't outweigh the long-term losses of any of the above.

Deal with the Situation

As the manager, you need to be more aware of the problem of burnout and take steps to monitor and avoid the situation:

- ◆ Be very clear about your performance and productivity expectations regarding your employees. Define clear measures and metrics and communicate them clearly and often. Get real commitments from your employees regarding time lines and deliverables. And make sure they feel safe in telling you when your expectations are unrealistic.
- ◆ Be very conscious of the levels of effort all of your team members are putting out. And don't think in absolute numbers. A 10-hour day may not seem like a big deal to you, but it can be an enormous commitment for a single parent or a person just coming off working three demanding projects.
- ◆ Spread the effort around. The amount of IT work is endless — as a manager, you have a responsibility to your company and your employees to carefully allocate work across the board. Certainly people have different work outputs, just as they have different working and communication styles. Your job is to consider the team as a whole, each person as an important part of that whole, and get the jobs done within that context.
- ◆ Make changes in personnel to reflect the needs of the jobs your team must perform. Need more people? Ask for them — and do so with concrete, numerical evidence of why you need them. Is one person on the verge of burning out because the company has overworked her? Shift that person's responsibilities. Is one person over his head in his job? Look for other places within the company that this person can contribute. (Care needs to be taken when doing this, as the employee may not understand.) In general, the IT world isn't for the fainthearted.
- ◆ Be aware of how much different people can give. Some employees can only deliver 40 hours' worth of work in a week, even if they are at their desk 60 hours. Others can easily double their efforts, for short times, in response to direct requests. Often, running at top speed isn't the fastest way to get there. Be sensitive to what motivates your employees, as well as their needs and limitations. Recognize that people can only be pushed, or even push themselves, so far. Recognize when they can be pushed further, and when you have to insist they take a break. Do this well, and you'll be rewarded with a far more productive and motivated team.

2.3 Employee Training

Training is always an issue for managers. While they know that it's a perk that employees often enjoy and it improves employee's skills, they are also concerned about its cost, the employee being away from his full-time responsibilities, and the fear that the employee will use the newly acquired skill to seek another job elsewhere. On the other hand, a few days or a week at a training class can serve as a respite for a hard-working employee as well as increase his skill set.

However, because learning new skills is such a critical part of working in IT, providing training is an important part of managing an IT staff. There are so many IT classes offered that it wouldn't be difficult to have someone spend more time at training classes than they do at work. As a manager you have to balance a few items when doling out training:

- ◆ Cost
- ◆ Need
- ◆ Employee morale
- ◆ Scheduling demands

Cost

There are two issues involved with the cost of employee training:

1. The cost of the training itself
2. The cost of having the employee away from her full-time responsibilities

Often, the second issue far outweighs the first. The expenses for an employee to attend a training class vary greatly. Some classes are offered either locally or online, and may only be three hours in length. But many training options include cross-country travel, which requires hotel, rental car, and travel expenses that can inflate the cost of the class by a factor of two or more.

Despite those variances, the real cost issue is often the expense of having an employee away from work for a period of time. Can you spare this individual for an entire week? Sometimes several people are sent to training together. Can you spare all of them? Sometimes contractors can fill in for staff members who are at training, in which case the costs are fairly easily measured. But other times, some of your other employees or people from other departments need to fill in; the "cost" of these solutions, while not always visible, is often much higher than a week in a hotel.

Need

What is the short- and long-term value of this kind of training for an employee? Often the needs are well defined: Joe needs a Windows Administrator class because he will back up Maria while she is on vacation. But other times, the issue gets cloudy: Mark wants to take an advanced Java programming class, but that isn't his exact responsibility right now and it isn't clear that the company is going to be using Java anyway.

"Need" may appear to be the clear deciding factor, but often the value of taking a training class is unclear. If that is the case, you need to use some of the other criteria listed in this section to help you decide whether or not to agree to have an employee take a training class.

Employee Morale

Many employees view training as a reward. It provides them with concrete, resume-enhancing skills, sometimes lets them "get out of the house" by traveling to a warm spot in midwinter, and often allows them to interact with professionals with the same interests and questions.

In addition, sending a staff member to a training course — or even suggesting it for yourself — can be an excellent way to motivate employees. Both you and your employees need to aggressively monitor their skill sets to make sure they are current and useful.

Also be aware that sending one person to training can occasionally cause a second person to feel resentment. One of the challenges any manager faces is how to juggle multiple responsibilities, such as how to manage multiple people. Make sure you spread the "wealth" around so that feelings like these have no basis in fact.

Scheduling Demands

This is probably the most difficult issue to deal with. Many of your own staff will find the issue difficult, rightly recognizing that a week away from the office means a week of catching up when they get back. Who will cover for them? If they are overburdened right now (as many IT people are), how are they ever going to make up for a lost week's worth of work? The answer is pretty simple: Evaluate the short-term costs versus the long-term gains. See the above three items; if the direct costs aren't overwhelming, if the employee (and your department) needs the training, and if their morale will be improved, go for it — and have them go for it.

How Do You Know When Your Employees Need Training?

There are three principal ways to identify when an employee needs training:

1. **They tell you.** IT people are deluged by training class offers and by situations where they are aware of their technical shortcomings in one area or another. Asking the boss for a class or two is a common request. (Asking for a week-long class on a cruise ship in the Bahamas is less common, but not unheard of.) You should consider an employee's request for training as a positive indication that they are interested in learning and doing more for the company. (It could also be an indication that they like being out of the office.) In addition, look at your employee's goals. Are they asking for the training to meet the performance goals you both set together?
2. **Your customers tell you.** The IT department's customers can be a variety of groups: they can certainly be outside customers, but they can also be (sometimes exclusively) internal. In either case, if you solicit feedback from your customers about what their IT needs are, you may hear about specific technical services that your department can't provide without either (1) getting more training for current employees or (2) hiring someone else to do the job.
3. **You find out on your own because you are a proactive manager.** Learn to address training needs before they become problems. If you do this, you'll save yourself tremendous time, money, and effort over the long term. You'll anticipate your department's needs for Java developers and start running the ads months in advance, knowing that particular talent is hard to find. You'll budget for a new Help Desk support rep early in the cycle, before the seasonal sales cycle kicks in and all the calls come in. And you'll send your people for training in Windows network administration, for example, before the project to upgrade starts.

Certification

Most IT Managers don't have the luxury of sending people to training just for the sake of training. As such, few IT departments are willing to sponsor their employees for training that leads to vendor or technology certification. This is simply because managers know that some of the classes in a certification program these days are fillers — they are of little or no use to a specific employee's job responsibilities. Of course, there are exceptions. Some managers may use certification as a way of rewarding highly valued employees, or for those employees whose responsibilities are very specialized. Of course, sending an employee to the requisite classes doesn't guarantee certification; the employee still has to pass the exam. (Note that some companies won't even pay for the exam if the employee doesn't pass.)

The value of certification is discussed in Chapter 3, Staffing Your Team (page 43).

What If the Employee Takes a Training Class, and Then Uses His New-Found Skills to Find Another Job?

Be Honest About This Problem

One effective technique is simply to address the issue with the employee beforehand, while you are still making a decision about whether or not they should go to training. As is often the case in business situations, bringing the topic out in the open can go a long way toward easing everyone's fears. Just discussing the issue doesn't create any legal arrangement, of course, but it should let both sides know where the other stands. As a manager, you should openly express your concern about the possibility of the employee "taking the training and running." You hope the employee will reply that the job is much bigger than one skill set, they like the environment, they would work here for free they like it so much, and so on. But if they don't, if they hedge or are evasive, or blurt out a series of negative statements, you've got a problem that a training class isn't going to solve.

Employee Agreements

Many companies have a policy that says an employee has to sign an agreement to reimburse the cost of training if she resigns within X months of taking a class. Of course, many employers and employees are hesitant about even making such an agreement because it creates somewhat of a non-trusting, non-supportive relationship. Before asking your employees to agree to something like this, make sure you discuss the issue with your HR department — there is probably an existing policy about it.

Because the IT world is so fluid, this situation works the other way, too. Employees can spend months on certification programs for a company and then the company changes direction. For example, one IT Manager had his entire Oracle database certification paid for but the company decided (at the last minute) to stay with Microsoft SQL. He eventually left to go to an Oracle shop.

Non-Technical Training

When you think about IT training, you generally think about technical training. It's important to remember that some of your staff may also benefit from non-technical training as a way of expanding their horizons, such as:

- ◆ Time management (for those who have trouble staying organized)
- ◆ Business writing (for those who have to prepare memos and reports)

- ◆ Presentation skills (for those who have to give presentations to groups)
- ◆ Interpersonal skills (communications, conflict management)
- ◆ Supervisory skills (for those who have a staff to manage)
- ◆ Project management (for those responsible for keeping projects on track)
- ◆ Leadership skills (for those who have to manage others)

Non-technical training can have tremendous value. Employees may not appreciate it as much as technical training, but you will value it. You can tell an employee that you're sending him to a non-technical training because you have plans to move him up in the organization, or you might tell him that his deficiencies in these areas are holding him back.

Your HR department can be the best source for non-technical training information. Training options are now more flexible and more accessible than ever before; in addition to the explosion of night and part-time schools, companies that provide on-site training, online courses, and the myriad of different media-based educational options make getting trained a lot more convenient.

Maximizing the Value of Training

If you send an employee for training, it's because you see the need. It's then up to you as their manager to make sure that they're putting these skills to use. You should review the course curriculum to get a feel for what the employee should be able to do after completing the class. If an employee isn't using the skills learned in a class, it could be because the selection of that particular class was a poor one, or that you haven't challenged them to use their newly acquired skills. There are some ways to test technical skills. See Chapter 3, *Staffing Your Team* (page 43), for tips on conducting technical interviews.

In addition, consider the following training ideas:

- ◆ Have the employee who went to training give an informal (“brown bag lunch”) training session to the rest of the team. You can then see how much the employee learned and give your entire team some of the benefits of the training.
- ◆ Have the employee formally train the employees who didn't attend the training; if the employee goes to the initial training with that goal in mind, it can add value to their experience as well as save the company money.
- ◆ Consider on-site training where the content can be more contextually specific to your organization and your configuration.

2.4 Performance Reviews

Performance reviews are probably the single most important discussions you'll have with members of your staff. Although performance reviews are traditionally a once-a-year event, some companies are now doing them twice a year. Regardless of the frequency, a professionally done review should be done just like you should do your taxes: The end result should be the formalization of 12 months of regular discussion, feedback, analysis, and evaluation. Do the work in small bits all year, and you will be ready when the big moment arrives. Neither you nor the employee should be shocked at what is discussed.

The annual review process gives you a chance to document the employee's accomplishments, dedication, commitment, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. Many companies have evaluation forms that have been developed by the HR department. Other companies have no form and leave it up to each manager, or simply rely on a memo-style format. However, a form generally won't help you since a useful evaluation should really consist of descriptive narratives and discussion, not merely checked boxes.

Performance reviews are often used to resolve two other important company issues: rewarding over-performing employees and addressing under-performing employees. Poorly written evaluations make both of these tasks even more difficult, and the costs of failing at this are high:

1. Mishandled terminations can (and often do, these days) end in lawsuits.
2. Mishandled reviews of good performers often lead to the key employee changing jobs to get what they should've received from you.

Key Areas of Evaluation

Areas that you want to consider when reviewing an employee's performance include:

- ◆ Quality of work
- ◆ Flexibility
- ◆ Creativity in solving problems
- ◆ Communication skills
- ◆ Innovation
- ◆ Going above and beyond the requirements of the job
- ◆ Coordination and collaboration with others (particularly those they don't have direct authority over)

- ◆ Accountability
- ◆ Ability to complete assignments in a timely manner
- ◆ Ability to pick up new skills on their own
- ◆ Ability to work with and enhance the work of other staff members
- ◆ Ability to manage short- and long-term projects

Quality of Work

Is this person providing excellent or mediocre work? Not every staff member will give you spectacular performances. On the other hand, not every staff member is compensated spectacularly. But your needs as a manager may be such that this person fulfills certain other critical functions: They may be a team member who keeps others enthusiastic about the project, for example, or set a good example for keeping focused, or have a deep knowledge of company history and provide long-term perspective to decisions.

Flexibility

Most roles have job descriptions, some job descriptions are even written down(!), but almost no job description adequately anticipates the real-world demands of the position. It's important for every employee to understand the real goals of the department and how he can help achieve those goals. Changing market conditions, changing project demands and priorities, and changing technical capacities all require employees to be flexible about their tasks. Has this employee adapted well to the fluid requirements of the job?

Creativity in Solving Problems

Along with flexibility about their job descriptions, good employees are often creative in solving problems. Five new employees started Monday, but only four laptops were delivered; a creative employee might find one in the test lab to tide everyone over. The rush order for two new servers needs a manager's signature, but she called in sick today; a creative employee will find a manager from another department or the manager's boss to get the order started.

Communication Skills

Can this person communicate well? Do they send clear, easy-to-read e-mails or do they send rambling e-mails that take 10 minutes to read and are still difficult

to understand? Do they speak well in meetings, do they make personal attacks, or do they say nothing at all? Technical people are often not great communicators because their jobs often don't require tremendous amounts of interaction. But there is a base level of information exchange that every job requires, and a base level of interactive behavior that every organization requires. If a person works in a group, there are certain standards that must be met.

Innovation

Today's technology can be used in many different ways. And when multiple technologies are combined, the possibilities can grow exponentially. Innovation is an attribute for finding new ways of doing things — or doing new things. This could be anything related to simplifying processes, reducing errors, or finding additional uses for existing tools.

Going Above and Beyond Requirements of the Job

Many employees view their work as nothing more than a job, a day's work for a day's pay, and have almost an adversarial stance about doing anything more. Can you fault someone for doing only what they are supposed to do? However, for those who view their work as more of a "career" than a "job" and seek to be promoted and move up, going above and beyond the job requirements is one of the best ways to achieve those goals. This can include helping out co-workers, volunteering to do the more challenging tasks, working on items that no one else seems to want to do, etc.

Coordination and Collaboration with Others (Particularly Those They Don't Have Direct Authority Over)

"Plays well with others" is another way to describe this attribute. It simply means that you work well with others on a team. This could apply to situations where a large team is formed for a particular project, as well as the case of individual contributors that periodically have to interact with others. It also includes gaining the respect of those you work with. To do all this well requires a number of skills and traits: interpersonal, influencing, leadership, communication/listening, trust, adaptability, compromise, and relationship building.

Accountability

Managers look for accountability in their employees primarily because it makes the manager's job easier. A manager prefers knowing that when an employee

is assigned a task, it will be done, and the manager won't have to do regular checks to ensure that work is progressing. (See the next item on completing assignments on time.) Accountability also means that the employee will recognize what their own responsibilities are, and will not sit around waiting for the manager to tell them what to do. If your staff isn't accountable, you end up as a micro-manager. On the other hand, it's up to the manager to make their employees feel accountable through follow-up, project assignments, stated goals and objectives and a clear statement of the job requirements, as well as the impact to others when things don't go as planned.

Ability to Complete Assignments in a Timely Manner

For most companies today, timely performance is critical. Gone are the days when deadlines were approximations and missing them had few consequences. "Just-in-time" no longer refers to an inventory technique; it now is often used to describe how entire departments and companies act in response to market conditions.

Be clear about your expectations for timely performance and let your staff know you'll be using that as a criterion for evaluation. And let them know that you are being evaluated on that basis as well. Installing the new phone system on Monday instead of the Friday before may be suddenly required, but create an environment where people feel comfortable suggesting coming in on Saturday (or at least discussing if it is necessary).

Ability to Pick Up New Skills on Their Own

The IT world changes so quickly that it's an employee's fundamental responsibility to help herself, her department, and her company stay current. Every department has the programmer still resting on his legacy coding skills; encourage your staff not to become that person. See the "Employee Training" section above for details on the issue of training. Some companies provide tuition reimbursement to earn toward a degree.

Ability to Work With and Enhance the Work of Other Staff Members

You may have a Windows Administrator with superlative technical skills but zero people skills. Let him know that your IT department is a team, not a random collection of individuals, and everyone is expected to interact professionally with each other. Snarling or swearing at anyone else who touches the system isn't acceptable.

Many a manager has had to say "You don't have to like all your fellow IT department members, but you have to treat them with respect." This is a

common problem with technical people, and one way of solving the issue is to inform them that their behavior in this area is part of their review.

Ability to Manage Short- and Long-Term Projects

Every employee in IT is given projects, some long and complex, some short and simple. Inform your staff that their ability to handle projects is an element you will be evaluating when it comes to review time. Many employees might not think in project-related terms; they think their task is to get the new laptops installed in the Sales department in the next two weeks (and not see how it relates to the bigger goal of a new sales-force automation system implementation). Of course, that is a project, a set task with a specific goal, resources, and a timeline. For some levels and tasks, as long as they finish the projects on time and under budget, it isn't important for them to think in project management terms. But those who do see the bigger picture and take the long view may have brighter futures.

Specific Evaluation Statements

The words used in performance reviews can have a great deal of impact, or no impact at all. You want to be sure that you are clear, and that each statement has meaning and value to the employee. Avoid ambiguity, and use examples to back-up your assessments. See Table 2.1 for some samples.

Useful Metrics

If the individual being reviewed has a position that is operational in nature, you should include quantitative metrics in the review:

- ◆ Network up-time
- ◆ Systems response time
- ◆ Call resolution/response time
- ◆ Number of incidents/calls addressed per hour/day
- ◆ System reliability

Guidelines for Reviews

Don't forget: both you and the members of your IT staff are salaried professionals. Act as such, and treat them that way. Your respect will be rewarded.

Table 2.1 Sample evaluation comments

<i>Statement Type</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Description</i>
Almost useless	“Mark is a fine worker with a good attitude; he works hard and has done a good job for the company.”	While it may be true, this statement tells Mark nothing concrete about his past performance and gives him nothing to focus on for the future. Nor is the company served by this kind of statement. How valuable an employee is Mark, and how can it help Mark grow?
Positive	“Martha was exemplary in her efforts to complete her implementation of the new health-care plan project on time. In addition to working over several weekends, she also enlisted the help of two departments to meet the October 1 deadline.”	This is a very useful comment for Martha; she knows her efforts were noticed and the company knows they have a committed employee.
Negative	“Mary Jane showed no interest in expanding her professional skill set; she turned down several offers for training classes in new programming languages; and refused to move to a new project that would have required her to learn new procedures.”	Mary Jane knows exactly what she did wrong and, if she chooses, how she can change her behavior to act differently in the future.

No Surprises

As mentioned above, preparing for a review is often a year-long process that ends with the written evaluation and the meeting with the employee. As such, a performance review shouldn't contain any surprises for the employee, especially bad surprises. Any negative comments that you include in the review should be items that you've discussed with the employee multiple times in the course of the year.

Be Objective

It's important to remember that a performance review is the company's formal assessment of the employee's performance. Be as objective as possible. Remember reviews of your own performance — often the most contentious items are the subjective ones. With this in mind, your performance review should be full of examples and specifics to back up your assessment. Providing quantifiable accomplishments and measurable goals helps you remain objective.

Also, remember that other people will read this review in the future. Other people in the company, for example, may read this review when thinking about transferring the employee into their department. Or the person may leave and may later reapply at your company. Be sure that your comments accurately reflect the employee's performance.

Carefully Record Details

The more specifics you can provide, the more valuable the review will be for the employee. And the more specifics you can provide now, the more understandable it will be in the future. It's hard to recall the incidents you need when you're looking back on the past 12 months. Review your own status reports for ideas. And, during the year, jot quick notes to yourself on scraps of paper that you toss into the employee's file. While this sounds like a great idea in theory, it's in fact something many good managers do on a regular basis. Details matter, and memories fade. Record them as they happen and both you and the recipient of your work — for this is real work that managers have to do — will be better for it.

When reviewing these notes, take the long view. Try and look over the course of the entire year and remember that you probably wrote those notes when something was going particularly well, or particularly poorly. Perhaps those comments are right on target, or perhaps they represent an emotional high or low.

As you prepare the review, you can also ask the employee for her own list of accomplishments (and areas they think they can improve upon) over the past 12 months. This can help jog your own memory and help you understand what the employee considers her greatest achievement. Additionally, it helps you see what the employee thinks were her most important contributions. Getting her input can help you avoid embarrassment by failing to mention something that was important to her.

Negative Reviews

Performance reviews that are mostly or entirely negative are difficult for both the reviewer and the reviewed.

There are four important points to keep in mind if you are in this situation:

1. Be as specific as possible
2. Negative reviews should not be a surprise to anyone
3. Keep HR informed
4. Be professional

Be Specific

Not only will the session(s) probably be very emotional, but the end result can be more positive when you can be very specific about what happened. This detail includes not only past performance but current events; be clear and detailed in your notes about what conversations took place and what each party said. If the employee failed to meet goals, identify what those goals were, and where the employee came-up short. Stick to the facts and be objective.

It Should Not be a Surprise

Follow the guidelines outlined in this chapter; constantly communicate with your staff and record both accomplishments and failures throughout the year. If you do these things, both you and the employee should be aware of the mismatch between their goals and their performance.

Keep HR Informed

Make sure to keep your HR department informed. If your company doesn't have an HR department, find an appropriate third party to keep informed of (or sit in on) the situation — your own boss is a logical choice. If you keep someone else involved and aware of the situation, you will always have a third party to check back with (if required) later in the process.

Be Professional

Take extra care to make sure that what you write comes off in a highly professional manner. Resist the urge to list failures. Instead, cite circumstances where the employee “fell short of expectations” or “needs development” to identify areas where the employee needs to focus his efforts. In some situations, an employee may not be aware of his own weakness; for example, his contributions and involvement at staff meetings are more like speeches instead of discussions. If this is the case, consider it a coaching opportunity for you and a development area for him.

The task of preparing for and conducting performance reviews really shouldn't be emotional, but in some cases it will be stressful and time-consuming.

Example of When You Might Need to Give a Negative Review

Susie did a mediocre job, but more problematic was the fact that she was very difficult to deal with. As a result, most people avoided working with her. To make matters worse, she was used to getting very positive reviews.

When reviewing someone like this, you might want to ask them what they want out of the job. Do they want to move to the next level (e.g., level 3 to level 4), which would mean a raise along with the promotion? If they answer “yes,” then you can proceed to list all the things they need to do in their current position that they aren’t doing, and then list the things that they need to do to get to the next level. For example, you could say: “You’ve completed this first project, which is great, but the second one wasn’t completed on time. Why?”

After the explanation is given, then you say that you understand, and in the future, they need to report sooner or more effectively about what is going right or wrong. Then, you can add, for example, after they’ve completed all these tasks (as in the case of Susie), she would need to mentor someone else and/or be the lead on a project. It may be that both you and she know this isn’t likely. If that’s the case, and she’s unable or unwilling to say that, you have given her the motivation to either step up to the task or (honestly) find other work, because the next review will be explicit about this new task.

Have Employees Review Themselves

Many companies have adopted the formal policy of having employees, in addition to their managers, review themselves. The employee uses the same form as the manager and evaluates her performance over the specified period of time. Naturally, self-reviews (like resumes) can contain some elements of (how shall we put it?) “skill inflation”? Nonetheless, the exercise is a very valuable one for both the employee and the manager. The employee gets a chance to express her concerns and talk about what she thought her strengths and weaknesses were. Identifying the gaps between the manager’s assessment and the employee’s self-assessment can help in figuring out development opportunities, and identify where problems are.

“360” Reviews

The theory behind “360 degree reviews” is that an employee receives feedback from not only his direct supervisor, but from other individuals as well, which include peers and subordinates (see Table 2.2). A person may work on a project run by another department manager, for example; in that case, the other

manager can have direct input into the employee’s review. Or an employee may work much more with two staff members and may only occasionally see their direct manager. (Some employees have management in other states or other countries.) In that case, 360 reviews allow the individuals who most directly work with the person to provide input on their performance.

When 360 reviews were a new evaluation technique, many companies tried them; how many are still using them isn’t clear. If your company is using them, or thinking of using them, be prepared for more feedback — both good and bad — at review time.

Table 2.2 Pros and cons of “360 reviews”

PRO	360 reviews provide opportunities for people traditionally not asked for their opinions to express them; customers, for example, often have to be proactive about providing feedback to suppliers.	CON	They generally involve a <i>lot</i> more data. And, the feedback from multiple people may be inconsistent, which makes it difficult to identify pluses and minuses and figure out a development plan.
	The quality of review for some workers improves tremendously because the people best suited to evaluate an individual are now involved in the process.		In addition, people who haven’t done performance reviews before are suddenly providing detailed review data; you may or may not want information on Ken’s workplace cleanliness, for example.

A newer trend is to use 360 assessments not as formal review components but as feedback mechanisms throughout the year. In other words, you may ask the manager from another department for feedback on your staff member once the project ends, store that feedback away, and use it during the review. Or solicit input from project team members at the end of the project and use that data later. But when review time comes around, you don’t need to poll five co-workers of the employee or customers that person has talked to; you already have that data. You do a performance review as you normally would using the data you collected throughout the year.

How to Conduct the Actual Review Discussion

When it’s time to meet with the employee to go over the performance review, remember it’s a discussion — make this an interactive time, not a linear one. Do

not simply read the review to him. In fact, you may want to consider giving the employee time to read the review in advance of your meeting, so that he has time to digest it and can then discuss it intelligently and unemotionally. Remember though, as a manager, to discuss it with conviction. This is your “assessment” of his performance. You should be willing to make changes for two reasons: gross error (e.g., a project was completed on time, when you said it wasn’t) or language nuances.

Respect Privacy

If you work in a cube farm, make sure you reserve a conference room or arrange for an off-site meeting. You will both want the comfort of knowing the conversation isn’t being overheard, regardless of whether everything is positive.

Tone of the Discussion

You need to be clear in your discussion with the employee. Depending on the employee’s performance, your tone may need to include hints of motivation, hard-heartedness, and optimism. At the end of the review, there shouldn’t be any doubt in the employee’s mind as to what you think of his performance, where he has excelled, where he needs to improve, and steps he needs to take to do so.

In certain cases, you might want to have specific follow-up meetings with an employee at regular intervals after the formal performance reviews. If necessary, you may want to consider additional interim informal reviews at certain, pre-specified times.

2.5 Additional Resources

Web Sites

- ◆ www.humanresources.about.com/od/360feedback (360 reviews)
- ◆ techrepublic.com.com/5138-10878_11-729776.html (360 review templates)
- ◆ www.pfd.org/leaderbooks/drucker/bio.html (Drucker quote)

Books and Articles

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- ◆ Jaffe, Brian D., “Following a Few Simple Rules Can Ease the Pain of Employee Reviews,” *InfoWorld*, January 26, 1998.
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- ◆ Maslach, Christina, and Michael P. Leiter (Contributor), *The Truth about Burnout: How Organizations Cause Personal Stress and What to Do about It*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997.
- ◆ Potter, Beverly, et al., *Overcoming Job Burnout: How to Renew Enthusiasm for Work*, Ronin Publishing, 1998.
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