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Leadership Performance (https://www.p2excellence.com/category/tuesdays/leadership-performance/), Performance Management (https://www.p2excellence.com/category/tuesdays/series/performance-management/)

## BRING BACK THE BASICS, REMOTELY SUPPORTING HIGH PERFORMANCE TEAMS

**Bring back the basics, how you will effectively support your team in driving high performance in a remote/hybrid setting.**



I remember getting on a call with my team early into Covid, when we were asked to put together training to respond to leaders' fearful question, "How will I manage performance (https://www.p2excellence.com/tag/performance/) from afar?" One of my colleagues said simply, "We've been doing this for years". And she was right. Long before Covid, you managed people from San Francisco to Hong Kong from your office in Chicago. You weren't co-located then, either. As we brainstormed about all the advice we would share with leaders in this training, we laughed as we came back to the same basics that we'd been teaching for years. Packaged new, of course, under the banner of managing remotely.

As you head into 2023 and think about the year ahead, the work your team will need to accomplish, and how you will effectively support them in driving high performance, consider what's changed about managing in a remote/hybrid setting and what you can do about it.

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## What's Changed?

You no longer have a physical open-door policy where an employee can stop by informally to discuss their work, ask questions, and get support. (After all, no office, no door!)

In a remote setting, employees need to learn to be more self-sufficient and solve problems independently rather than coming to you for answers.

Not in the office, you can no longer measure a person's performance by watching them work and monitoring their activity.

As the manager, you no longer have the most holistic picture of your employees' performance as your direct interactions have decreased.

Our employees' wellbeing is having a significant impact on their effectiveness, and wellbeing is harder to determine when you aren't face to face.

## What do you do about it?

### **Over communicate.**

How many times have we cancelled this week's regular one on one, telling ourselves "We'll meet next week". No hallway check ins make these sacrosanct. We can also borrow a practice from our kids... checking in regularly and informally via chat tools makes us feel connected (please do not follow the practice of my teenagers as 1000 snaps per day is too many!)

### **Practice coaching.**

Rather than telling your employee what to do or how to do it, ask questions to help your employees figure things out. My favorite question to ask my kids is, "What do you think you should do?" This will teach them to trust their instincts. This takes more time, something we don't often have, but as you practice coaching, you'll get time back as your employees begin to handle problems themselves

Measuring performance isn't about monitoring activity, but rather about **measuring the outcomes of those activities.**

One manager I coach asked, "How will I know they are sitting at their computer when they are at home and not doing laundry?" My response, "If they are producing the results you agreed to and are getting a load of laundry done in the meantime, is that so bad?"

**Reach out to those who interact with your employees regularly**, such as internal customers or team members.

If you hate writing performance reviews, let me share my secret with you. I remember when I put this into practice and the email feedback started rolling in. Concrete example. Stories of positive impact on customers. "Wow, what great content for my performance review discussion", I marveled. My blank page was now full of actionable feedback. Much like today, many of the examples were about things I was not present to witness.

These were the simple questions I asked:

- 1) What impact did this person have on the results of the project?
- 2) What skills were strengths that helped them to succeed?
- 3) What skills, if improved, would make them even more effective? Provide examples.

**Make wellbeing a regular part of your check in conversations** through questions such as "Is there anything I can do to support you?"

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While the world has become increasingly complex, **the pace of change relentless, and the need to be agile more important than ever**, as my colleague pointed out, these recommendations (<https://www.p2excellence.com/tag/recommendations/>) take us back to many of the same basics we've always espoused...

- Communication is critical
- Coaching builds sufficiency
- Performance is about results
- Multiple perspectives on performance creates a full picture
- and Happy employees are more productive employees.

We've all read many articles on Continuous Performance Management (<https://www.p2excellence.com/category/tuesdays/series/performance-management/>). They all say the same thing. Goals can't be written in January and never revisited. Regular checks-ins are needed to ensure goals are adjusted as business needs change and that feedback is timely and can help an employee adjust their behavior in real time.

Great, we get that. But as a leader, how do you do it?

**LET'S START AT THE BEGINNING WITH GOALS.**

Early in my career, I recall a conversation with a group of managers about goals. I got the predictable commentary, "That's just a busy HR exercise". I asked them, "How will you achieve your department goals this year? You have to know how many widgets each employee needs to produce for you to hit your department goal. And more important, they need to know. If individuals aren't clear what they are accountable for and don't meet their goals, you won't either. Now tell me, why is this an HR exercise?" Goals ensures employees know where to focus their attention day in and day out.

In today's business world, where things are rapidly changing, detailed planning for an entire year in advance isn't a great use of time.

### **How can you make goals agile and meaningful?**

- Start with the big picture of what you want your employee to achieve that year – your high-level annual objectives. This is about the 'what', not the 'how'. And just as important, why they matter to the company and its goals. Let's connect this to a personal example we can all understand. One of my high-level personal objectives is to reduce the stress in my life this year, which is important for the overall welfare of my family (happy wife, happy life, my husband likes to say). That's my 'what' statement.
- Next, for each of these high-level objectives, define the 'how' – the specific goals they will tackle in the next quarter that will move them toward their end result. Back to my stress. This quarter, I am focused on managing my career stress. I'm sure no one can relate. Recently, I talked to the founder of a consulting firm that hires independent consultants like myself. He asked me, "Tell me about the work that is your nirvana, and what sucks the life out of you". Sorting this out for myself and then figuring out how to live that has given me a great start on this quarter's specifics. Next quarter, I think I'll tackle how to reduce the stress of parenting (with two teenagers, that might be a multi-quarter endeavor!)
- Remember that new needs will arise, so don't over commit upfront. If my husband's double knee replacement on Valentine's Day brings the stress I think it might to an already busy household, I may have to pivot my focus in mid-February! Leave some room for flexibility.

### **THAT BRINGS US TO REGULAR CHECK-INS.**

Hold regular check-ins – we recommend weekly and at a minimum monthly – to discuss progress against goals (the past), to celebrate wins and discuss barriers and risks (the present), and to discuss action plans for the coming month (the future). As business priorities change, discuss changes to goals real time.

#### **These questions serve as a great agenda for your regular check ins:**

- What progress have you made in your quarterly goals?
- What recent successes have you had, and what enabled them?
- What are the greatest challenges you are encountering, and what can I do to help?
- What have you done recently to further your development?
- Do you feel you have the support you need to do your job?
- Is there anything else that would be helpful to you now?
- How do we need to adjust your goals for the next month/quarter?

### **CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK IS KEY.**

Setting clear goals each quarter makes providing feedback easier as employees understand the expectations. When we observe people doing things well, and we reinforce those actions by giving positive feedback, we help people understand the behaviors that were successful that we want them to continue. And when we skillfully give corrective feedback, we help individuals understand how their actions must change to be more effective.

#### **We know we need to provide regular feedback, but how?**

- To open up the conversation, let the person know of your positive intent. Be direct but compassionate. "I know this project is really important to you. I'd like to give you some feedback that, I think, will help you be even more effective".

- Use the action-result model. “When you took this action, it had this result”. With constructive feedback (<https://www.p2excellence.com/tag/constructive-feedback/>), add an alternative action they could have taken, and the positive result that would follow. It works with family too. “When you didn’t come home by your curfew, I was worried. Next time, call with an update and I won’t have to embarrass you by calling all of your friends looking for you.” As in the example above, focus on specific observable behaviors, not generic labels. Generalizations such as “You’re inconsiderate” doesn’t tell my son what he needs to change.
- Make it a regular habit in your check-ins to ask “What did you do well in this presentation/this week/with this project milestone” and “What could you have done differently or more of, to be even more effective?” Can I share another secret? Asking people to self-assess can take the pressure off you, as employees often know where they could improve. I recall a manager of mine who did this early in my career. After the third time (ok, maybe the fifth), I came to expect the questions and would come prepared. Feedback became a natural part of every conversation. Asking what your employee could do to be “even more effective” is a more positive approach than asking what they did that was ineffective.
- Ask your employee for feedback on what you as their manager can do more of, less of, or stop doing to better support them. If you listen and respond appropriately, modeling the behavior will build trust.

As a manager, you may worry that constructive feedback will hurt your employees’ feelings. **In reality, employees want to be developed. Regular job-related feedback is actually one of the most powerful, least expensive forms of development,** compared to a course once every three years when they have to work to apply the learnings to their job. Your employees are too busy to continue to do things that are ineffective. Timely feedback helps them be more effective and manage in this increased chaos. One of the ah-hah moments in my career as a new manager was this: “Withholding constructive feedback condemns a person to repeat the same mistakes over and over.” And who wants to do that?

If you would like to bring a culture of feedback to your organization or team, or a more up-to-date continuous performance management (<https://www.p2excellence.com/tag/performance-management/>) process, that’s my nirvana, and I’d love to help (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/nancy-lupinski-talent-exec/>). As you think about where you will spend your time at work this year, commit to carving out intentional time to talk regularly to your employees about their work. Don’t worry about making it perfect. Your sincere efforts to support them won’t go unnoticed.

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## NANCY LUPINSKI

For over 20 years, I worked and led teams in the global talent management space within many industries including consulting, academia, energy, industrial distribution, insurance, and financial services. Today, I take my passion and my depth and breadth of corporate experience and consult independently to help companies ideate pragmatic talent solutions and drive them to impactful execution.

As a highly results-oriented and consultative senior leader, I am effective at collaborating and gaining buy-in from stakeholders, partnering successfully from the executive level down. My high standards coupled with curiosity, strong project management, and organizational skills result in top-notch work.

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