

employee performance solutions

# How to Respond to the Most Common Reactions to Performance Feedback

By Jamie Resker

**W**hy do so many managers avoid giving performance feedback? What can HR do to help these leaders summon the managerial courage to effectively address even the stickiest issues? For most managers, identifying the critical performance issue is easy. They know what needs to be said but are not sure how to say it. Crafting a hearable and sayable message that won't put the employee on the defensive is the first step. Equally important is helping managers anticipate how an employee might respond to feedback and knowing which types of conversation techniques to employ to keep the discussion on track. In fact, fear of how an employee will respond is the

No. 1 reason managers say they delay and sometimes completely abandon performance conversations. Many managers feel there is no way to adequately predict and prepare for an employee's response to feedback and are, therefore, convinced things will spin out of control. In reality there is a fairly predictable range of reactions, some of them even positive. We have identified the Top 10 Employee Reactions and suggest effective ways of addressing each. Understanding these reactions and what to do if confronted by them can move managers to take on challenging and potentially volatile performance issues.

## SET THE STAGE FOR SUCCESS

### – SKIP THE CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM APPROACH

There is nothing constructive about constructive criticism. It puts people on the defensive, kills dialogue and makes it unnecessarily difficult for employees to acknowledge a performance issue and move on to a solution.

The key to creating a successful performance conversation is to emphasize what the employee needs to do to succeed in the future rather than focusing on what has caused them to miss the mark in the past. The traditional feedback approach requires that the employee's shortcomings are raised; after all, most of us are taught that we first have to prove the employee is underperforming.

For example, the message might sound something like, "Jim, we need to talk about how your behavior at meetings is shutting down the group's creativity. When you did this, this and that...."



Messages delivered in this fashion almost always guarantee a defensive, self-protective reaction. A non-critical delivery would sound something like, "One of the areas I'd like you to develop relates to helping others contribute their ideas during meetings. What I'd like to see happen is..."

Thinking and talking in terms of what you would like to see happen in the future as opposed to harping on what is wrong is the best way to achieve your goal of getting the employee to hear what you're saying versus defending against what you've said.

### **INITIATING THE DISCUSSION –WHY MANAGERS DON'T**

You have identified something the employee needs to be aware of and have crafted a message you believe will come across in the best possible way, paving the way for a productive two-way dialogue. Now it is time to actually have the discussion. Is your gut response to delay, avoid or completely abandon the discussion?

If so, you are not alone. In fact, many managers indulge that gut instinct and put off the conversation at this stage of the process. Why? Because they are unsure of how the individual will respond (expecting the worst), which creates the fear that the discussion could spin out of control and leads to a conclusion that there is no point in having the conversation in the first place. While this may be a very common story managers tell themselves, in reality the following is true:

1. A handful of reactions account for more than 85 percent of all performance feedback responses, and not all of them are negative.
2. Most managers are quite adept at predicting the reaction they will get from a given employee. In fact, they get it right more than 90 percent of the time.
3. The real issue for most managers is that they are unsure how to handle the reaction they receive.
4. There are a number of recognizable reactions managers can learn and prepare for to successfully respond and steer the conversation in the best possible direction.

An employee's response to performance information can run the gamut from "I know I need to work on that" to "I can't help it, that's just the way I am." If you manage people long enough you will likely encounter a full range of responses regardless of how well you craft the message and prepare for the response.

It is important to remember that while you cannot control the response to your feedback, you can manage how you frame your talking points and handle the reaction. Therefore, we will focus on identifying the common reactions and provide tips and sample responses that will help successfully drive the direction and outcome of the discussion.

**The reactions are arranged in order of the most positive responses to the most difficult:**

### **1. THE EMPLOYEE ACKNOWLEDGES THE FEEDBACK**

Acknowledgement indicates that the employee is open to feedback and interested in improving their skills or behaviors. You're now ready to begin exploring solutions and setting goals that will help the employee to be successful.

#### **Listen for the following Types of Employee Responses:**

- "I know I need to work on that."
- "I know that's the one thing I really need to focus on."
- "I was wondering when this was going to come up."

#### **Tips – Sample Manager Responses:**

- "Sounds like something you're able and willing to work on. The next step is to put our heads together and explore

### **2. THE EMPLOYEE EXPRESSES A LACK OF CONFIDENCE**

Some employees are uncertain in their abilities to succeed or are risk averse and afraid to fail. Based on how the employee has reacted to the feedback your sense is that the employee is thinking I know this is something I should be doing but I'm not sure how, or I don't have the confidence.

#### **Listen for the following Types of Employee Responses:**

- "I know I should be sharing my knowledge at some of our industry conferences, but I just can't seem to find the time to put together a presentation."
- "I'd like to work with Jim to resolve our differences, but I'm just not sure where to start."
- "I just don't have the time it would require to mentor a new engineer."

#### **Tips – Sample Manager Responses:**

- "My sense is that this is something you have the capability of doing but that you'll need my help and support in order to be successful. I'm invested in helping you to be successful. If you can agree to put forth the effort, the next step would be to talk about solutions and the support that will help to get you up and running on X."

### **3. EMPLOYEE ASKS FOR EXAMPLES – TONE AND QUESTIONS ARE SINCERE**

In some cases, the employee does not understand what is being asked of them and will ask for examples to gain a better understanding of the area of development.

**Listen for the following Types of Employee Responses:**

- "I actually thought I was providing the right level of service to our clients. Can you tell me more about what you mean?"

**Tips – Sample Manager Responses:**

- "It sounds like it would be useful to go through some examples of what I mean by providing great customer service. Can I start with this?"

**4. EMPLOYEE ASKS FOR EXAMPLES – THE TONE IS CHALLENGING AND DEFENSIVE:**

Most of us have had the experience of dealing with an individual that regardless of the merit of the feedback and examples, they will not acknowledge the issue. In these cases your examples will most likely be countered with excuses and rationalizations. The discussion may grow increasingly uncomfortable and you will sense an inability to move the conversation forward, in fact you feel as if you're heading down a rat hole.

**Listen for the following Types of Employee Responses:**

- "I don't know what you're talking about. I do provide great customer service!"
- "I don't know where you're coming from. I think I am a team player – it's the rest of the team that has the problem."
- "I don't know where you're coming from. That's not something I need to work on."

**Tips – Sample Manager Responses:**

- Begin by offering expectations (what you want the individual to do) versus examples of past performance.). Say, "Can I give some examples of what I'd like to see?"
- "It sounds like what you're asking for are some examples of why I think you need development in this area."
- Once you are satisfied that enough examples have been provided and that you haven't heard anything new to change your perspective and the employee has not acknowledged the area for development (approximately 15 minutes to 20 minutes have passed), it's usually time to end the discussion.

**5. EMPLOYEE MAKES INVALID EXCUSES, DEFLECTS, DEFENDS, RATIONALIZES.**

In these cases the employee may acknowledge what you have said but they are also implying they will not change. First and foremost, be open to hearing new information that may shift your thinking, but if you haven't learned something that changes your position, then the broken record technique can help you keep the employee focused on the issue at hand.

**Listen for the Following Types of Employee Responses:**

- "I can't help it, that's just the way I am."
- "It's not my fault..."
- "I'm sorry, but when people ask such basic questions it just annoys me."

**Tips – Sample Manager Responses:**

- "I know what you're telling me, but the fact remains that I need you to put customers first."
- "I know where you're coming from, but the fact remains that I need you to work collaboratively with your peers."
- "I agree, your territory is unique, but the fact remains that we still need to make the numbers each month."
- "I'll be the first to acknowledge there have been a lot of changes around here, but I still need you to support the change with how we process returned orders."

6.

**NON-COMMITTAL**

You can hear the reluctant manner in which the employee has reacted to the feedback, and you sense the required commitment and focus will not be put forth.

**Listen for the following Types of Employee Responses:**

- "Well, maybe, I'll see what I can do."
- "I can't make any promises, but I'll try."
- "All right, whatever you say."
- "All right...I'll do it."
- "Fine, I just won't talk to anyone anymore."

**Tips – How to Respond:**

1. Your tone and response are telling me you're not on board with what I've asked, and in order to move ahead I need you to be 100 percent committed."
2. "I'd like to have you think about what we discussed and whether it's something you can put the required effort toward developing."
3. "If it is, then great, we'll work on some solutions and put together some written goals that will help you be successful."
4. "It's also important to let me know if this isn't something you can make a full commitment to. If you decide it's something you can't do then that's OK, too, but then we'll need to talk about consequences."
5. "In the meantime let me do the following: I'll put together a summary of our discussion so that you can be clear on the expectations I've outlined during our discussion. Let's get back together tomorrow morning at 9:30 a.m."

## 7. MY PREVIOUS MANAGER NEVER RAISED THIS ISSUE BEFORE

Unfortunately, it is all too common for managers to inherit an employee with performance issues that went unaddressed by previous managers. However, allowing the issue to continue because it was ignored or mishandled in the past is not a reason to avoid a course correction now.

### The Employee Might Say Something That Sounds Like the Following:

- “Well, when Jim was my manager, he never brought this up as an issue.”

### Tips – Sample Manager Responses:

- “I want to say up front that I’ll likely have some different expectations from Jim. My way of operating is to provide full information and the last thing I want to do is wait until performance review time. The best time to talk about expectations is beforehand.”

## 8. EMPLOYEE QUESTIONS WHY YOU HAVE NOT RAISED THE ISSUE IN THE PAST

The employee is feeling disbelief and is questioning your motives for raising a long-term issue that hasn’t come up in past discussions or performance evaluations. It would be understandable for an employee to question your motives for why a long-standing issue is just now surfacing.

### The Employee Might Say Something That Sounds Like the Following:

- “Why haven’t you brought this to my attention before?”

### Tips – Sample Manager Responses:

- “I should have brought this up before now. We can’t go backwards, but we’re starting from today. The reason I’m raising this outside of the performance review is I’d like to give you the opportunity to work on developing X before the formal evaluation process.”

## 9. ARGUMENTATIVE

If you haven’t already had a performance conversation with a difficult employee during your management career you will most likely have to face this unpleasant experience at some point—it may just be a matter of time. The employee will not acknowledge feedback in any way, shape or form and, therefore, will not improve their performance. In other words, no matter what you say, how it is said or how accurate it is, you will not make any headway in getting the employee to change.

### Difficult, Difficult and More Difficult:

- In this scenario you have an employee whose performance can no longer be tolerated at the current level, and they are unwilling to acknowledge the area for improvement. It’s not unusual for a chronic underperforming employee to become argumentative and behave in a defiant manner.
- At this point you haven’t learned anything new that changes your position, the performance is unacceptable and the employee just won’t acknowledge or take ownership of their performance. You are now about 20 minutes into the discussion and getting nowhere. This may or may not be the first conversation.

### When to End the Discussion:

- You have used some of the conversation management techniques such as providing examples and the broken record, yet regardless of what you say or how you say it, the employee will not acknowledge the performance development area.
- The conversation is going nowhere and possibly escalating to where the employee is becoming argumentative and hostile. You may find yourself wanting to take an argumentative stance such as raising your voice and saying things that later on you wished you hadn’t said. End the discussion before things reach this point by saying:

1. *“I’ve outlined exactly what I need for you to be doing differently. It’s up to you if you choose not to agree. However, I do need to let you know the consequences.”*
2. *I cannot have your performance continue as is, and I’m going to have to pursue next steps if I can’t get you to agree to work on this.*
3. *Before we get to that point let’s do this. Let’s end the discussion to give you some time to reflect on the feedback I’ve provided.*
4. *Let’s reconnect tomorrow morning in my office at 9 a.m. If this is something you’re willing to work on then great, we’ll work on some solutions and create written goals that will help you to be successful. However, if this is something you can’t commit to then that’s OK, and I’m not going to take it personally but it will lead us into talking about the consequences.*
5. *In the meantime, I’ll put together a summary of our discussion so that you are clear on the expectations I’ve outlined during our discussion.”*

**GET HELP:** If you’re a manager you’ll want your HR contact or equivalent to be aware of what’s happening. The situation could be heading towards end of employment for the underperforming and uncooperative employee. Sometimes parting ways is the best and only option available. You can then open up the position for someone who will successfully fill the role.



## 10. CALLS YOUR BLUFF

While it may be difficult to believe that someone might imply that there is nothing you can do to change their performance or move them out of the organization, there are brazen employees who will respond with nearly those words or with a tone and posture that implies something similar.

The individual may say or imply:

- You can't get rid of me.
- You're really not going to do anything anyway.
- I can outlast anything you throw my way.
- I'm so valuable that the rules don't apply to me.
- In this scenario you are most likely dealing with a chronic underperformer or an employee with high skills but problematic behaviors who is unwilling to accept or act on the feedback.
- The employee may take the "You're not really going to fire me?" stance when their performance has been tolerated in the past. If performance is "outside of the upper right hand corner" of the Employee Performance Continuum and the individual takes no ownership of their performance despite your efforts to help them meet target performance then it's time to consider an exit plan.

### Listen for the Following Employee Responses:

- "What are you going to do? Fire me?"

### Tips – Sample Manager Responses:

- In challenging tone the employee says something like the following: "I've outlined exactly what I need for you to be doing differently. If you choose not to agree that's up to you.

However, I do need to let you know the consequences. I cannot have your performance continue as is, and I'm going to have to talk with human resources about next steps."

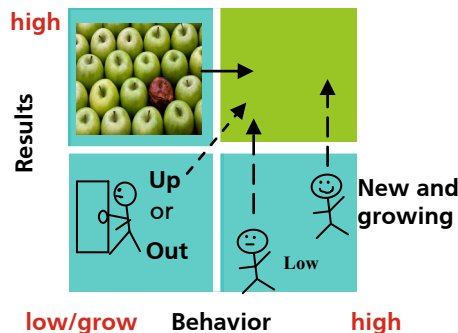
At this point you should consider creating an exit plan for this individual, opening up their position and hiring or promoting an employee who is able and willing to succeed in the role.

Does your performance management process do this?

**It should.**

EPS will get you there.

### The Employee Performance Continuum



Intentional performance management means small and regular conversations between managers and employees which leads to higher individual and organizational performance. EPS offers pragmatic easy to use processes, tools and skill-building workshops proven to increase the quality and frequency of performance feedback. Workshops are delivered live, through e-learning, webinar and train-the-trainer and materials licensing for corporate and government clients.



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