

# Conducting Performance Evaluations During the Pandemic

During annual performance evaluations, managers typically consider what an employee has accomplished since their last yearly review, especially in terms of meeting goals and making improvements in targeted areas. This year is very different, though. Chances are that what has unfolded since the first quarter of 2020 is drastically different than what anyone could have anticipated during the previous evaluation cycle or when performance objectives were set for the current year.

## Flexibility in Evolving Circumstances

When preparing 2020/2021 performance evaluations, flexibility is key. Holding employees to the same goals that were put in place during last year's performance evaluations is likely not realistic in light of recent circumstances impacting businesses and their employees.

Many businesses have had to take significant steps to adapt to COVID-19, such as:

- Managing drastic increases or decreases in demand;
- Quickly transitioning some jobs and/or services to virtual work;
- Adapting the work environment to provide social distancing for roles that cannot be performed virtually; and
- Supporting employees through unexpected challenges at home, such as virtual school and COVID-19-related concerns or diagnoses.

It's impossible to measure the success of either employees or organizations under these circumstances using standards that were put in place before any of these things happened.

## What Does Effective Performance Look Like Now?

Reviewing employee job descriptions is ordinarily the first step for employee evaluations. That's still a good thing to do this year, but the perspective needs to evolve. This year, it's important to look at job descriptions through the filter of the pandemic, pulling out what is reasonable to expect employees to do - and to what extent - in light of the pandemic's impact on business operations and individual employee circumstances.

In other words, employers need to consider what effective performance really means in light of all that has happened since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as expectations about possible changes in the coming months. Consider if some ordinary standards should be relaxed or temporarily redefined at this time.

## **Adapt Goals to Current Circumstances**

Goals still matter, of course, but they do need to be adapted to current circumstances. Employee goals that were set for the current year need to be considered through the lens of pandemic impact. Consider what overall store targets were for the current timeframe and compare them to year-to-date achievements. If there is a significant overall difference, use information about the difference between projections and actual achievements to adjust expectations for what employees should have achieved at this point in time.

- For a store that experienced increased demand paired with workforce decreases due to quarantines, COVID-19-related leave, or other issues, it's important to consider whether expectations of those who shouldered the increased workload should be adjusted. Consider whether some measures might not be reasonable under emergency production circumstances.

## **Give Credit for Adaptability**

This is also a good time to consider updating the criteria used to evaluate the effectiveness of an employee's performance. Chances are that your store(s) has managers and employees both who showed leadership in the organization's efforts to transition some teams to working with social distancing, masks, etc. with little or no advance warning. Their skills and adaptable behaviors are extremely valuable in the 21st century world of work.

Seek to identify key behaviors relevant to how employees have handled the pandemic response that should be recognized and reinforced this year that wouldn't have even been considered during the last evaluation period. For example:

- Team members who exhibited innovation and adaptability regarding new ways of working due to the pandemic should be recognized for their ability to effectively cope with change.
- Managers should be recognized for their willingness to do what is necessary to keep operations going by stepping outside of their comfort zones to lead virtual teams, when they were accustomed to managing on-site employees.
- Employees who gracefully adapted to workplace safety measures made necessary due to pandemic-related regulations or evolving safety concerns should be recognized for their cooperative attitudes.

## **Consider Compliance Implications**

Regardless of how the performance evaluation process is adapted or implemented in your store(s), it is always important to consider compliance implications. Be sure that employees are not marked down or otherwise disadvantaged in terms of how their performance is evaluated for taking leave as provided for under the CARES Act. The same is true for requirements, guidance or recommendations issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), local health authorities or other state and local officials (such as a governor or local government).

## **Don't Pause Performance Evaluations**

Even though the process of evaluating performance needs to change this year, it is important not to just skip annual evaluations if they are an ordinary occurrence in the store. If they are skipped this year, it will send a message that they are not really important. Managers may be more likely to see them as just a paperwork exercise moving forward; employees may think that the store and their managers don't really view performance measures and employees' feedback as important.

Just because you shouldn't pause evaluations doesn't mean that your approach can't change. Some options to consider include:

- Using an approach similar to previous years', with modifications regarding what is considered appropriate performance in light of difficult circumstances.
- Seeking feedback from managers and employees regarding what they perceive as the most important measures of success in the current environment. Use that information to develop the equivalent of a one-time use evaluation form. Gather this information via an anonymous survey and/or web form that team members can use to share their thoughts.
- Taking a more individualized approach that involves a structured dialogue between managers and their individual employees rather than traditional quantitative evaluations. If you've been considering adding one-on-ones to your traditional performance review process, this may be a good time to pilot this approach.

These are just a few options to consider. One or more of them may be appropriate for your store, or there may be a better path. Ultimately, leadership needs to decide what makes sense in your organization and visibly champion that decision.

## **Be Transparent About Changes**

Whether you choose one of these options or something different, transparency is critical. Leadership should let employees know what changes are being made to performance evaluations and why.

- Let employees know that leadership is committed to meeting their need for feedback.
- Inform employees that changes are being implemented to ensure the performance appraisal process is fair and equitable, since so many factors impacting the organization and employees have changed over the past year.

One lesson just about everyone has taken from 2020 is that the future is not predictable, so don't make any promises about what the next year might hold.

## **Building a Solid Foundation for Tomorrow**

A store that isn't willing to be adaptable about how employee performance is measured and evaluated during the extraordinarily difficult circumstances everyone has faced

during the COVID-19 pandemic will likely find itself experiencing decreased employee morale, engagement and job satisfaction, as well as difficulties recruiting and retaining talent as the economy starts to recover. How a store treats employees when times are tough is very telling about how you view your most valuable resource. People are more likely to be loyal to stores that value them and treat them well in good times and in bad than to ones that don't recognize the challenges employees face in difficult circumstances.