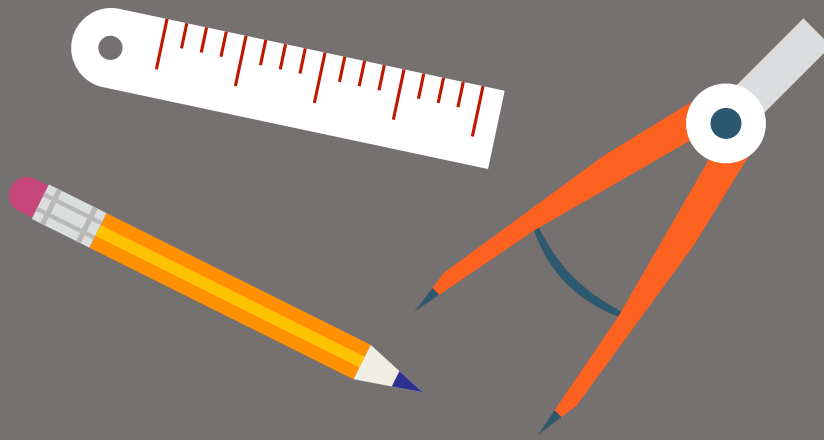


25 Effective Phrases

To Use In Written
Performance
Reviews



PRACTICAL TOOLS

25 Effective Phrases To Use In Written Performance Reviews



These 25 phrases can help you make the performance reviews you write be more effective. Each phrase has an explanation of how it should be used. Remember to tailor them to the individual as much as possible.

Positive reinforcement

- 1) You've done a good job being our lead person in (fill in specific) area.
- 2) You did (_____) and (_____) well.
- 3) You have a right to be legitimately proud of ...
- 4) We'll help you any way we can.
- 5) We are confident that you can do this.
- 6) What we'd like to see more of is ...
- 7) You have met our high expectations.

Clarifying the review's focus

- 8) Your strong points are ...
- 9) Opportunities for improvement or priorities for the coming year.
- 10) What's really important is that you continue to do more of (_____) and find a way to do less of (_____).

Encouragement to take on new challenges

- 11) You've had a good year, and the coming year will bring new challenges.
- 12) We need to keep looking through the front windshield, and less in the rearview mirror.

Achieving goals

- 13) Here are some intermediate steps to help you get to those goals.
- 14) Here are some ways you can immediately start increasing your contributions to the organization and taking steps on the managerial ladder.
- 15) To stay fresh and motivated, you may want to seek additional challenges.

Focusing on areas that need improvement

- 16) You have acknowledged that (_____) did not turn out the way we all wanted it to.
- 17) You have acknowledged that if you could do it over again, you would have done some things differently.
- 18) You don't want to acquire the reputation of being a whiner (or any other negative trait).
- 19) Here are three ways that help overcome this problem— (then list them).
- 20) A 360-degree review has confirmed that ...
- 21) With apologies for not having raised this earlier ...

Statements of agreement

- 22) We're in substantial agreement on ...
- 23) We have agreed that these are the three areas that we're really going to work on ...

Team building

- 24) We are looking forward to working together on ...
- 25) My door is open—I'm here to help you.

Positive reinforcement

- 1) You've done a good job being our lead person in (fill in specific) area.

Reason: It may sound like a little bit of job inflation, but the review presents an excellent opportunity to help the employee put what her she does in a different context and on a higher level. A FedEx employee may say that he drives a truck. His supervisor may tell him instead that he delivers important orders to customers on time, and is a front-line employee in the best position to gauge customers' changing wants and needs. Such re-phrasing may make the employee feel better about what he does, and may also help him refocus on what's really important—customers—as opposed to his own narrow viewpoint, i.e. the truck. An employee who writes for the company blog or intranet can be told she's the leading eyes and ears for what's happening in the world of work, or in your office, etc.

2) You did (_____) and (_____) well.

Reason: In the review, don't stop at simple generalities, like "you had a pretty good year." Be specific. If praise is in order, make it concrete and say exactly what the employee is to be praised for. Praise means much more if it is tied to the specific behavior being praised. It also ensures to a great extent that the desirable behavior you want to see gets repeated.

3) You have a right to be legitimately proud of ...

Reason: Don't be afraid to insert some emotion into the written word. If the employee is particularly proud of some achievement, it's important to make note of it. They should be proud of something they've done. Those emotionally invested in the job tend to perform on a higher level.

4) We'll help you any way we can.

Reason: It's important to send a signal that you have the employee's back. It's not an us-vs.-them situation. Tell them in writing that you're on their side and will cheer their successes. You're not waiting for them to fail and fall on their faces.

5) We are confident that you can do this.

Reason: It's important to show the employee that you're not the enemy sitting in judgment on his or her performance. You're on their side and invested in their success. You'll do anything within your power to help them achieve their goals. Many employees lack self-confidence. Anything you can do to boost their confidence can help them perform well—for them, somehow seeing the printed words in black-and-white can be all the validation they need to believe in themselves.

6) What we'd like to see more of is ...

Reason: People need to hear direct, immediate and specific feedback on what they did well, in at least equal proportion to what they did not do so well. Don't forget to give praise when and where it's due. Don't take good behavior for granted. If you get it consistently, note it and praise the employee for it. That way it will be repeated.

7) You have met our high expectations.

Reason: Never tell an employee that he or she is an "average" performer. You might as well ban the word "average" from written performance reviews. It's a huge de-motivator for employees. They always think of themselves as above average, at least in some areas. No one wants to be average. If you want to tell someone that he or she is doing an adequate job—although nothing outstanding—then "meeting our high expectations" is a much better phrase than doing an "average" job.

Clarifying the review's focus

8) Your strong points are ...

Reason: You want to make sure that you mention good points as well as areas where improvement is needed. It's best to tilt the balance toward the positive, as long as the good points are real, quantifiable and documented. If the employee can only be praised for a perfect attendance record, that's a strong point, but it suggests there may be other weaknesses in the alignment of goals. You want to make sure they've really tried hard at something that's of vital importance to overall company goals.

9) Opportunities for improvement or priorities, for the coming year.

Reason: In the written review, you want to identify the areas where the employee's efforts did not yet meet with the degree of success you and the employee had hoped for. But it's important to phrase these areas in a non-confrontational and non-accusatory way, to reduce any defensiveness and to give the employee the chance to honestly accept his or her own shortcomings as learning opportunities to do better in the coming year.

10) What's really important is that you continue to do more of (_____) and find a way to do less of (_____).

Reason: The best written performance reviews can be described as an action-oriented word picture capturing the employee behaviors that matter most to the success or failure of the organization as a whole. Don't be afraid to be brutally honest here, and explain why those desired or undesirable behaviors matter.

Encouragement to take on new challenges

11) You've had a good year, and the coming year will bring new challenges.

Reason: Don't say it if it's not true, but if the employee, during the verbal part of the review in his or her self-assessment, said he or she felt it was a good year, those are important words to repeat in the written review. It's always a good idea to jot down a few of the phrases from the employee's own words to use later in the written evaluation summary of the review. If the employee sees his or her own words reflected in the review, he or she is more likely to buy into the assessment. However, it's also a good idea NEVER to let an employee rest on his or her laurels; always get them focused to the future.

12) We need to keep looking through the front windshield, and less in the rearview mirror.

Reason: The use of this metaphor helps convey the message that the performance review is deliberately framed in terms of what's important for the future. The past is the past and no one can change what happened. Keeping the review focused on the future also helps defuse any defensiveness or argumentativeness employees might show about past mistakes.

Achieving goals

13) Here are some intermediate steps to help you get to those goals.

Reason: Sometimes the big goals seem too far away and impossible to reach. You may have to help by outlining intermediate steps that can get them part of the way there.

14) Here are some ways you can immediately start increasing your contributions to the organization and taking steps on the managerial ladder.

Reason: Employees sometimes press for an immediate promotion during a performance review and you know they're not quite ready but you don't want to kill their ambition and hope, either. It's important not to kill the dream right away and disillusion them totally. You can say that their goal might be achievable eventually, and you may be able to get them to agree to try taking

on a little more responsibility in other areas as a preparatory step. Let them try some “job enlargement” as a temporary substitute for that desired promotion.

15) To stay fresh and motivated, you may want to seek additional challenges.

Reason: You want to keep everything positive and forward-looking. Don't use negative phrases like “don't get into a rut ...” Even though you admonished the employee NOT to do that, subconsciously, the employee may well get the idea that maybe the manager is right and that he or she really is in a rut. That's not a good frame of mind for employees to be in. You want to encourage positive thoughts, looking toward the future and focusing on what is good about working in your organization.

Focusing on areas that need improvement

16) You have acknowledged that (_____) did not turn out the way we all wanted it to.

Reason: Assuming that you were able to get the employee to admit to certain shortcomings during the verbal part of the review, it's important to document that admission in the written review so that it's made clear. While it's common to engage in finger-pointing and try to blame others for their own failures, this type of phrase in a written review helps employees refocus some responsibility and accountability on themselves.

17) You have acknowledged that if you could do it over again, you would have done some things differently.

Reason: This follow-up statement may make it easier for them to assume at least part of the responsibility, and helps direct the conversation toward the future—and to hopefully avoid similar problems. It is important to establish an atmosphere in which it is permissible to make mistakes—as long as people learn from their mistakes. An organizational culture in which employees are terrified to admit their mistakes for fear of being ridiculed or even fired leads to cover-ups in which mistakes are compounded and the end result becomes much worse.

18) You don't want to acquire the reputation of being a whiner (or any other negative trait).

Reason: This is a nice subtle way of telling a whiner to stop being a whiner, but it's put in such a way that it's hard to argue with. What are they going to say? They can hardly say it's not true and that they DO want to acquire the reputation of being a whiner.

19) Here are three ways that help overcome this problem – (then list them).

Reason: With the insertion of these helpful hints, the review becomes less of a critique and more a guide for improvement. You're merely sharing what others have done to overcome similar problems, which should be non-threatening to everyone. It's a good idea to give several ideas on how to solve problems, because one size may not fit all, but the employee should be able to put at least one of the ideas to good use. And if he or she doesn't ... well, the record is clear that management has done everything possible to help the employee before proceeding to other measures.

20) A 360-degree review has confirmed that ...

Reason: Many companies that take performance reviews seriously gather 360-degree feedback on an employee prior to conducting the annual performance review to see how the employee is perceived by his or her underlings, superiors and also colleagues on the same level in the organization that the employee has to work with in the course of his or her regular duties. If all feedback points to a certain problem, it needs to be brought up in the review and emphasized in writing. Attributing the feedback to a 360-degree review makes it harder to argue with the conclusion—if everyone says so, there must be something to it. Peer accountability can also be a powerful tool for changing behavior.

21) With apologies for not having raised this earlier ...

Reason: Every supervisor knows by now that they're not supposed to save up criticism during the year and then hit the employee with it all at once at performance review time. One of the mottos of good performance reviews is "no surprises." Feedback on shortcomings should be given immediately all during the year. But in the real world, stuff happens. The supervisor may not have gotten around to giving feedback on a recent incident yet. Or the real effects of some mistake may not have become apparent until later. In that case, there's no alternative but to bring it up at review time. In those cases, it is best to be as honest as possible and apologize for bringing it up in this fashion.

Statements of agreement

22) We're in substantial agreement on ...

Reason: It's important to establish that the manager conducting the review and the employee being reviewed substantially agree on the main points. That shouldn't be too hard. If there have been frequent check-ins with the employee along the way during the year, there are not likely to be any great surprises anyway. The employee should know where he or she stands and what areas management may not be so happy with.

23) We have agreed that these are the three areas that we're really going to work on ...

Reason: When it comes to finalizing the written review, don't hit the employee with eight or nine things they have to work on. It's too much. No one can concentrate on nine priorities at the same time. Pick the two or three most important things which will have the biggest payoff for the organization and the employee, and have the employee agree that those deserve to be the primary areas of focus. Jathan Janove, a frequent speaker at the Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], calls this distinguishing between PIGS (pretty important goals) and WIGS (wildly important goals).

Team building

24) We are looking forward to working together on ...

Reason: Look for opportunities to insert "we" statements into the written review. Don't force it. Try to make it sound natural. Be sure the employee knows he or she is part of a team and that the entire team is expecting great things from the employee. Non-engaged employees are self-centered. They tend to think: "I put in my time, therefore the company owes me." The engaged employee thinks differently: "What is it that we're trying to accomplish and how can I help?" You want to stimulate that kind of spirit.

25) My door is open—I'm here to help you.

Reason: It's important for supervisors to extend this type of invitation to the employee being reviewed. It will give the employee the idea that he or she is not all alone in having to solve the problems of the job—the supervisor wants to listen to the problems and the pressures and can help solve them. All well-written performance reviews contain an invitation to an on-going discussion about what matters at work.