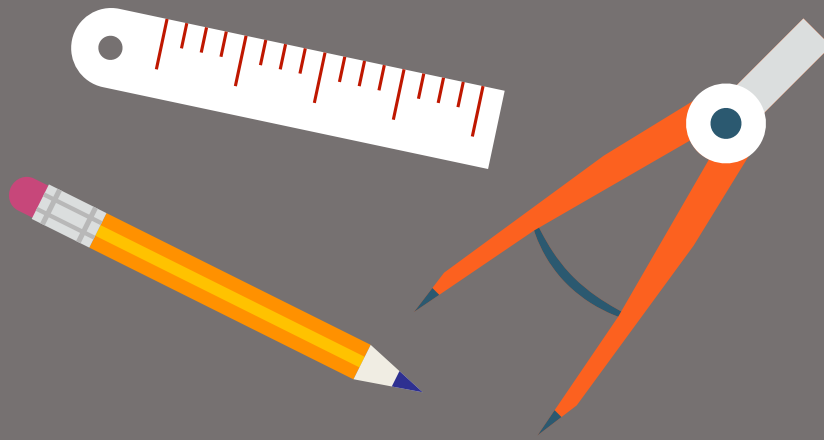


25 Phrases To NOT Use In Written Performance Reviews



PRACTICAL TOOLS

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These 25 phrases should be avoided in the performance reviews you write. They can zap employee morale, undermine productivity or even get you in legal hot water. Each phrase has an explanation of why you should not use it.

1) Your outstanding performance on (_____) can't excuse your failure on (_____).

Reason: Why this is not a good thing to say should be obvious. Yes, it is true that managers should never tell an employee that everything is fine, and that there are no improvements necessary to reach a next goal – employees should always be urged to stretch themselves to a next goal. But if you phrase it this way, you negate all the legitimate praise that you're trying to give. All the employee will hear is the criticism. Don't be afraid to let the praise stand all by itself and let it sink in. Separate the praise from the criticism.

2) Even though you've done a good job, be forewarned that I can't give you a big raise.

Reason: It is imperative to separate the actual review from any consideration of salary adjustments. Don't even mention anything about compensation in the review. Other factors go into salary

decisions, such as overall company policies, fairness vis-à-vis other employees and other departments, etc. Any discussion of salary is best left to a separate occasion, even though there often is some linkage. For example, an employee who gets a glowing review will be disappointed if he or she doesn't get some kind of raise – even if the whole company is operating under a wage freeze. And an employee who received a very critical review should not expect any merit raises, unless those are mandated by union contracts or other company policies.

3) Everything's fine – you've done a good job and you're getting average or above-average marks on everything.

Reason: Everything can't possibly be fine – there's always some wish list as to what more the employee could do. And such phrases detract from the seriousness of the occasion of the annual review. If the manager can't be bothered to go through a detailed analysis of the employee's performance, what is the employee supposed to think? He is or she isn't going to take the job seriously, either, since it doesn't seem like management cares very much.

4) In these two areas, I'm going to give you a B, but in this other area, I can only give you a D.

Reason: Don't treat a performance review as if it is like dispensing a report card. Adult workers don't want to be graded like they're back in school – so don't rate them as if they're back in school. It's a major de-motivator. People don't focus on their As and Bs anyway. All they want to know is why they got a D or an F on something. Make the effort to say in plain English what they've done well, and where they can improve.

5) I think ...

Reason: When it comes to making subjective judgments about employees, don't qualify what you're saying by prefacing it with 'I think ...' It sounds weak and invites a counter-argument ["Well, I don't agree and I think just the contrary ... "] It's a free country and everyone is allowed to think what he or she wants. But you're being paid to be a manager and your judgment rules. Whatever you want to say, just state it as fact and don't weaken it with qualifiers.

6) The big bosses want me to bring to your attention that ...

Reason: Some supervisors resort to couching criticism in that vein in a misguided attempt to distance themselves from the criticism. It's as if they're trying to form an alliance with the employee against upper management. This is never a good idea and doesn't help the company. It doesn't even help the employee, either. To the employee, the supervisor doing the review IS the representative of management and he or she is looking to that supervisor to explain management policies in a way which they can relate to and understand.

7) You've done an average job ...

Reason: Stay away from the word "average" both in the in-person verbal part of the performance review and in the written summary for the employee's personnel files. It's another huge downer for the employee. Nobody thinks of himself or herself as just "average." A better phrase is: "You meet our high expectations."

Since “average” implies a comparison with other employees, it’s better to stay away from the whole concept of where an employee ranks, and to instead focus in the individual – what he or she is doing well and where improvements are possible.

8) You’ll never be a manager around here ...

Reason: Most people dream of advancing in their careers. Whether they have the aptitude or not, they believe that climbing up into the management ranks is the way to earn more money, have a better life, etc. Even if they just don’t have it in them to be a manager, it’s best not to kill that dream and totally de-motivate them – as long as they’re performing adequately in the job that they’re doing. You can make them feel they’re progressing toward their goal by giving them additional quasi-management or administrative tasks, so-called “job enlargement.”

9) You’re a real star and there is nothing more we want from you.

Reason: Saying something too laudatory is just as bad as saying something too negative. Even your best performers should never see those words in their performance reviews, no matter how satisfying that might be to their egos. After basking in the initial glory, they will tend to rest on their laurels. People should always be given a next stretch goal to see what else they can do for the organization. If you have a hard time coming up with a next goal to strive for, ask yourself the “magic wand” question: “If I could wave a magic wand over this employee to really get everything I could possibly want out of him or her, what would it be?”

10) Here's a list of the things you did wrong during the past year ...

Reason: Feedback on specific incidents should be given throughout the year as the occasion arises, not saved up to be dumped on the employee all at once at review time. The review should be saved for big trends and things that are important looking to the future – either the good things because you want the employee to repeat them or the bad things you want him or her to try and correct.

11) There are 10 things we want you to do in the next year ...

Reason: People can't concentrate on 10 things at the same time. Not all 10 things can be priorities. Pick two or three of the most important things you want the employee to concentrate on and let it go at that.

12) 'You're always' or 'You never'

Reason: Generalizations are always dangerous and wide open to argument. It's best to avoid those all-inclusive statements and instead focus on specifics. If there is a need to confront an employee over his or her unacceptable behavior, tell them exactly what he or she did that is unacceptable, and explain why it is unacceptable. It's much harder to argue with specifics.

13) You seem to have problems getting here on time in the morning. But the fact that you're a single mother and you have to get your kids off to school is no excuse.

Reason: A statement like this leaves the company open to charges of gender discrimination. Far from making it appear that you have some sympathy for the female employee, this statement can show you have a bias against women. All employees have to meet the same standards regardless of circumstances in their personal lives.

14) We're going to cut you some slack because you're approaching retirement age ...

Reason: This is another patently illegal statement. If you ever have to move against this employee for disciplinary reasons, you've just handed the employee a prima facie case to sue your company for age discrimination. You've shown your bias already. All employees must face the same requirements regardless of age.

15) You seem to be a little lazy, so we want you to try harder.

Reason: Supervisors sometimes seem to want to express themselves creatively. While they can be applauded for trying – and it may be better than just filling in boxes on a form – it's better to just stick to the facts. You might say the same thing by writing: "We are confident you are capable of greater efforts."

16) You don't want to get into a rut ...

Reason: Even though this statement is put in the form of a double negative – you DON'T want to get into a RUT – the impression that the reader takes away is still overwhelmingly negative. The recipient can't help wondering: "Yeah, maybe I am in a rut," or "I can easily see how I could get into a rut here." And maybe he or she will start looking for employment elsewhere. You could get the same idea across by saying: "You can stay fresh and motivated by seeking additional challenges ..." Doesn't that sound more exciting?

17) You bear a heavy workload ...

Reason: Stay away from any phrases that indicate you may believe someone is overworked or could be working too hard. You're not the person's psychiatrist; you're the supervisor and you're trying to get the most and the best possible work out of him or her. Once you start using phrases like that, people may begin to feel they're working too hard and start to slack off. Instead, try something like this: "Your productivity meets and sometimes even exceeds our high expectations."

18) One of your strong points is a perfect attendance record ...

Reason: Don't praise someone for having a perfect attendance record. Just showing up for work every day is barely a minimum expectation. To praise the person for that sends the wrong message – like you would tolerate anything less? – and is also insulting to the employee. If you can't find anything else good to say about an employee except that he or she showed up for work, maybe it's time to consider whether you should have that employee taking up space in your organization at all.

19) In the future, you should avoid doing ...

Reason: While it's a good idea to focus the review toward the future and the desired behavior you would like to see from the employee, it is important to couch these expectations in positive terms. "Avoid doing this" presumably refers to a past mistake the employee has made. But if you repeat it and hit him or her over the head with it again, it may become a trap that the employee will have a hard time avoiding. It's like telling a child: Don't touch that – it's hot." Almost irresistibly, the child's hand will go toward the hot stove anyway. Again, it's always best to put it in a positive vein: "In the future, it may be best to do this

20) If things don't improve, you may be suspended and eventually terminated.

Reason: Any part of a progressive discipline procedure should be kept out of the annual performance review. All discipline should be handled separately from the performance review. If you litter the written performance review with “needs improvement” phrases, as a preliminary step to showing the employee the door, you'll probably trigger a wrongful termination lawsuit and you'll have a plaintiff's lawyer saying that it's your management skills that need improvement.

21) I want more from you ...

Reason: The manager who just writes that phrase in a performance review is being far too vague. It's a bad thing to see in the review because the employee doesn't know what to do after reading such a statement. Employees should always know what to do after being told to change any part of their behavior.

22) You need to improve ...

Reason: This kind of general criticism doesn't help employees improve. They need specifics. For example, if an employee needs to limit mistakes, share a couple of tips on what has helped other people encountering the same problem to improve. If one of the tips doesn't work for the employee, another one might. Employees should come away from a review with the idea that the manager is there to help them, not just to criticize them.

23) What would make me happy as your manager ...

Reason: This may come as somewhat of a surprise to you, but the employee's mission in life is not to make you happy as his or her supervisor. They don't have that pinned up in their cubicles as their daily goal to strive for – and it's not something they want to make one of their top goals. They may like you just fine as a manager or supervisor, but they have their own things to live for.

24) You have to listen closer to what I say ...

Reason: It may be true that the employee has a listening problem or sometimes doesn't follow instructions. But this is the wrong way to put it. The review should focus on the employee being reviewed, not on the manager doing the review. The review should not be about reinforcing the authority of the manager over the employee; it should be about the employee and how he or she can improve performance for the company's as well as for their own benefit. Many insecure rookie managers commit the error of making the review too much about reinforcing their own authority. They shouldn't need a review to do that.

25) All things considered, your performance was acceptable.

Reason: This sounds suspiciously like a rationalization – or some people call it rational-lies. The manager who writes this half-admits that things were not OK, but there are explanations for what went wrong and he or she just doesn't want to deal with it anymore. Those rationalizations can come back to haunt you. If the company has to move against the employee at a later date, and wants to say that the employee was always a problem, there will be nothing in any of the past performance reviews that sustains the company's position – and the employee is likely to win a wrongful termination suit.