

*This is the 4th article of 6 in the Managing Performance Toolkit.
You can download the articles in this series, and other tools, at:
atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation*

The Key to High Performance

To do a good job of managing your people requires a commitment to regular conversations and coaching. Supporting staff is vitally important but not urgent work and tends to be neglected in the overloaded schedules of many nonprofit managers. The period between setting yearly goals and the formal performance review is actually one of the most important times to support your team in creating superior results.

Two needs must be addressed in the period between goal-setting and performance reviews:

- Gathering information that you need from your staff to do your job well
- Offering the information and support needed for your staff to be successful

These needs can be filled in a variety of ways:

- Written reports
- Scheduled meetings
- Informal check-ins
- Group meetings

Here are some tips for making the most of these processes and generating the best possible performance.

Written reports

Written status reports can be very useful when a lot of information needs to be transmitted and/or where it's helpful to have a record. But, written reports are often a source of frustration, both for those tasked with creating the updates and for managers dependent on the information, if faced with chronic missed deadlines or poor quality.

Some tips for avoiding these issues:

- Be really clear on the Purpose and Outcomes for the written reports.
(See our tool: *The Fabulous POP Model*)
- Only then should managers and staff *collaborate* in creating report templates and reporting processes that:
 - meet the requirements of managers
 - provide value to the staff that have to prepare them
 - are easy to read and digest for those who receive them
 - are streamlined to produce the needed information with the least possible effort and stress to staff
- Revisit the written report process from time to time; be proactive in improving formats and/or eliminating reports that don't meet the above criteria.

Scheduled meetings with individual staff

- Make sure to calendar these well in advance.
- Take them seriously. These meetings are important to the people that work for you. While it's true that meetings with staff may appear to be more flexible than other contingencies that arise, repeated rescheduling by managers of check-ins will likely communicate the message that you don't care about your staff and their needs.
- Make sure to include time in everyone's work plans for check-ins, coaching and evaluations.
- Make REALLY good use of the time. Be clear what you want to accomplish. Either you or your staff should create a POP-directed agenda for each and every meeting.
- Schedule your one-on-ones for 5 minutes past the hour. Use those 5 minutes to mentally prepare for the meeting.
- Summarize takeaways and next steps at the end of each meeting
- Work plans are an invaluable tool for directing energy and measuring progress. Refer to them regularly throughout the year.
- When agreements have been made, and especially when any kind of difficult news has been communicated, it's useful to write these in a follow-up e-mail, as people all too often walk away from agreements and difficult conversations with differing memories of what was said.

Informal check-ins

- In between scheduled check-ins, you want to be available for support as needed.
- Make sure you're accessible. If you look too busy (and you may be), it will be difficult for those who count on your support and feedback to approach you.
 - If someone else manages your calendar, make sure they understand that your direct reports are a priority.
 - You may want to block out certain hours that you're known to be available.
- But, balance availability with your need for appropriate boundaries. Be clear when you are and are not available. (See our article: *Managing Interruptions*)
- As manager, make sure to initiate check-ins and not leave them totally for your staff to initiate.
- There is a concept in the business world called "management by walking around." This might look like stopping by peoples' desks for a quick check-in, or a quick Skype visit for reports in remote locations. It adds a personal touch absent in emails, memos and formal meetings.

Group meetings

- Depending on how your direct reports are structured, group check-ins can be a useful supplement to one-on-one meetings.
- Aside from the obvious advantage of saving time, they foster group learning and help build teamwork.
- The tips in the section on individual meetings around making efficient use of time apply even more strongly to group meetings.
- Group check-ins can be very brief. In the tech industry, stand-up meetings are very common. (See our tool: *Stand-Up Meetings*) Typically lasting a maximum of 15 minutes and often held every day, the meetings focus on 3 questions:
 - What have we done since yesterday's meeting?
 - What are we doing today?
 - Any obstacles that stand in the way of getting work done?
- It is also possible to work with models of peer accountability. In other words, rather than supervision being strictly a model of manager to direct report, it is possible for groups of colleagues to provide for themselves some of this support and accountability.

Tips on communication

Whatever the form of the check-ins, what's most important is how you show up.

A full study of the art of communication between managers and their direct reports is beyond the scope of this paper, but here are a few tips and best practices:

- **Be present**
Your people are your most valuable resource. Bring your best quality of attention to these meetings. Your inattention, being distracted or impatient, sends the wrong message.
- **Make it safe**
In order for check-ins to fulfill the function of generating superior performance, staff needs to feel safe to be vulnerable and transparent about what's not working or where they may be falling short. You, as manager, have the power to deny promotion or fire your direct reports. This is a structural barrier that needs to be overcome in creating a collaborative spirit in performance check-ins.
Managers can help by:
 - Behaving in ways that communicate trust in and respect for the person
 - Being consistently honest and transparent, so reports trust that they know what's going on and where they stand
 - Show interest and curiosity in both what's working well and where they are experiencing challenges or difficulties
 - Take a collaborative, problem-solving approach to challenges – e.g. "*What are we (vs. you) going to do about this?*" and, "*How can I help?*"

- Creating a learning environment where “mistakes” are met with, *“What can we learn?”* rather than blame and shame
- Being very clear about when you are offering suggestions vs. telling staff what they need to do

- **Be a coach**

Use these times together as opportunities to help develop your people. When your people bring you a challenge, it's tempting to quickly offer them advice or simply tell them what to do. It takes a bit more time on any given day, but your job is to help grow your people by developing their capacities to solve their own problems – to help them learn to fish rather than always provide them with fish dinners.
- **Slow it down**

We are moving at high speed during much of our workday, juggling multiple priorities, jumping from task to task. To create an environment suitable for coaching and learning, we need to create a different pace. Even if the meeting is going to be brief, we want to slow things down, to create a bubble in which deeper conversation can occur. The reason for suggesting you schedule 5-minute prep time for formal one-on-ones is partly to help you slow down and be present.
- **Adapt your style**

It is likely that the people who report to you will have different personality styles and backgrounds. People's needs for supervision vary dramatically. For example, some of your staff might thrive in a relatively hands-off style. They'll come to you when they need something and may feel crowded or disempowered by your checking in too often. Others of your staff may best engage their own power and creativity in interaction and do well with more frequent, more engaged check-ins. The golden rule needs to be adapted for supervision. Don't treat others as *you* would like to be treated. Do unto others as *they* would like to be treated. You must learn to adapt your own natural style of managing to meet the varying needs of your reports.
- **Remember the person**

Check-ins are time to step back and see our people as full human beings, not just a cog in a mission delivery system. In Google's extensive research about what makes an effective manager, one of the highest-ranked behaviors was: *“Expresses interest in team members' success and personal well-being.”* In our article, *Managing Performance 1: Overview*, we talk about “caring” and “compassion” as key attributes for bringing out the best in our people.
- **Model accountability**

If you want your staff to be accountable, model it. Be impeccable in keeping your end of agreements made with staff (including timeliness).

The magic formula:

Maintain a minimum proportion of 4:1 positive to corrective feedback

- Considerable research shows this ratio elicits best performance from people over time.
- The acknowledgement *must* be authentic – not a management technique, but coming from your actual experience of appreciation for their efforts.
- Timing of positive reinforcement should be as close as possible to the behavior.
- Frequency? More appreciation is better, even for the same action or behavior. It feels really good to receive positive energy.
- Celebrate victories. Public acknowledgment is often a wonderful boost to folks and a great complement to one-on-one acknowledgment.
- However, other research shows that if the feedback ratio becomes more than 13 affirming to 1 developmental feedback performance goes down. Don't let the appreciative approach get in the way of courageous and direct feedback regarding improving performance. (See our tool: *How to Give Feedback*)

Offering appreciation comes more or less naturally to us due to upbringing and habit. Our inclination to offer it generously also tends to rise and fall with our stress levels. Up until now, you could claim ignorance, but you now have the information:

Acknowledgement is one of the most powerful ways you can support high performance.

When leaders get busy, it can sometimes feel like managing people is a distraction from getting the work done. Don't be deceived. There is no more important job than supporting and cultivating the performance of your people.