



## ***Making Annual Reviews Meaningful***

*The secret is beginning with a clear annual PREview*

**Tim Stevenson**

### **ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REVIEWS:**

Employees dread receiving them; managers dread writing them. This yearly stroll through a gauntlet is hated by many. I have a file an inch thick filled solely with satirical and often hilarious articles written to prove the point.

### **Avoidance tactics**

Managers have devised a variety of tactics to ease the pain. One common method is simply to cut and paste last year's (typically positive) review emphasizing the same "action steps to improvement." Certainly, that is easier

in the short run, but managers going that direction often find themselves in a tough spot later when that employee has performed or behaved badly and all the documentation reflects positive reports. HR Directors are not amused by the sudden turn of opinion with no paper trail. And that is not to mention the lack of honest feedback the employee could have benefited from.

I've met many managers who are months behind schedule in their reviews, some eight months or more. I think I've figured out the strategy. If you can put off this year's review long enough, then again next year and the next, you can work your way all around the calendar and eventually skip an entire year! If you work it right, in five years you can end up doing only four annual reviews.

Whether or not that's anyone's actual strategy, review-reluctance is a genuine problem. There's got to be a better way.

### **My own battle**

During the years I led a large staff, annual reviews were the worst thing I had to do. I tried five or six different methods, and none



**Tim Stevenson • Certified Executive Coach**  
E-mail: [csc.tstevenson@yahoo.com](mailto:csc.tstevenson@yahoo.com) • Phone: (469) 585-3982

[www.StevensonCoaching.com](http://www.StevensonCoaching.com)

Twitter: @StevensonCoach

Executive Coaching • Leadership Development

of them worked satisfactorily. I even tried ignoring them, hoping no one would notice.

That's when I discovered that my direct reports *wanted* to receive meaningful annual reviews. They were disappointed if I didn't do them clearly and well. These were smart, motivated people, and they wanted to know they were succeeding. They wanted to know that their work pleased me, and they wanted my input on how they could develop further in their professional lives. They wanted to pursue excellence.

When I earned my certification in Sherpa Executive Coaching ten years ago, I found the answer. All my angst about doing performance *reviews* was misplaced. It was a symptom, not the root of the problem. My real weakness was in doing **performance PREviews** — in other words, **setting expectations**.

## The Expectation Mountain Process

"Expectation Mountain" is a Sherpa Coaching process for managers to clearly communicate expectations to a subordinate. It is a great tool for delegating. It works for assignments as small as a project due this afternoon, or as large as a Job Description. It works for individuals and for whole teams. And here's the main point for today: Expanded to a year's perspective, it is the perfect tool for conducting an effective performance PREview that sets the stage for a meaningful and positive annual REview. Here's a brief description.

### Pre-work

**Before working this process** is a private step on the part of the manager called Pre-work. This is your **thinking time** when you make sure you are clear in your own mind what this assignment entails. You also ask some self-check questions: "Is it doable?" "Is it reasonable?" "Is it fair?" "Is it consistent with

other things I've said and done?" Only when you've done your own homework as a manager are you prepared to manage the work of others.

## 1. Communicate

**Take time** to clearly explain the details of the plan — the classic "5 Ws": Who? What? When? Where? Why? — emphasizing the **desired outcomes**. Wise managers also tap into the employee's motivations for doing the job: things like recognition, appreciation, advancement, belonging, relationship with a respected leader (hopefully, you).

With more advanced employees, I believe they should collaborate in building the annual plan. My senior staff leaders were experts in their fields. When we met to discuss the year ahead, I would begin by asking *them* what *they* believed they should accomplish. I usually found that they thought more ambitiously and more creatively than I did. I would add my input and we'd come together on the plan.

## 2. Commitment

Again you must slow down and take time, but here it's to **ask questions and listen**.

First, **ask them to play back in their own words your expectations**. Listen for clear understanding.

Next, ask the following two questions:

- 1) "Do you foresee any problems or obstacles accomplishing these things?"
- 2) "Can you foresee any help or resources you will need?"

Think back to an occasion where your boss delegated something to you. What was your brain already doing while he or she was still speaking? You were already projecting ahead to figure out how you were going to get there, anticipating problems, and so on. By asking them now, you are shortening the process.

These questions also position you as a good servant leader. By flushing those needs out into the open early, you can take steps to help meet them and empower your people to act.

### 3. Consequence

Some only use the word “consequence” to mean negative things, but it also refers to positive outcomes. Draw a picture of what this assignment means in the big scheme of things and to the employee personally. What’s riding on this plan, plus or minus? Are there ramifications for the department or team of the job’s being done or not done? Does the employee’s bonus or raise depend on this? These things need to be clearly communicated and understood.

After these first three steps, the Performance Preview is complete.

### 4. Coaching

Coaching refers to what goes on between the end of that preview conversation and next year’s review.

Poor managers confuse **delegation** with **abdication**. They give a job assignment, believing they can then forget about it. That’s why they have to endure and clean up so many unpleasant surprises later.

Effective managers don’t wait till the night before the due date to ask, “How is it going?” They check one-fourth of the way, half-way there, and in the stretch run. They not only ask how it’s going, but, “Have you run into any unexpected obstacles?” “Have you discovered any resources or help you need?” As a result, jobs get done well and on time, and employees learn and grow in the process.

Regarding the employee’s annual plan, this would translate to **meeting no less than quarterly to revisit the plan**. You’ll discover

what obstacles or new factors have been encountered, and have the opportunity to adjust for the remainder of the year.

### What you can do

I believe that if you follow this process throughout the year you’ll find the annual review process easy, clear, and meaningful. For the employee there will be **no surprises**. This review is simply a summary of what you’ve talked about for a year. You’ll also find that preparing for the next year will come quite naturally as well.

The content of an annual review should never be a surprise. It is not fair for an employee to be blindsided or battered for failing to achieve standards that were never clearly communicated. Failure to follow this principle is probably the greatest reason for the widespread hatred of the process.

**The secret to giving an effective annual review is to give an effective annual PREview**, sharing clear expectations of the outcomes you’d like to see from the employee one year in the future, followed by periodic revisiting of the plan and results, and making needed adjustments.

What about if you’re behind, playing catch up? I say, **start now**. If the reviews are due six months from now, have a “half year adjustment review”; if they’re due three months from now, have a “third quarter” expectation meeting. Better late than never.

Don’t be discouraged. Apply the wisdom of this great old Chinese proverb:

*The best time to have planted a tree  
was 20 years ago.  
The second best time is now.*

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