# CLOSING THE GAPS with Performance Management

By Michael Kairios, MHRM, SHRM-CP

**In many organizations, performance evaluations are viewed as a necessary evil. While recognized as necessary, the process is often dreaded and viewed as an arduous and tedious administrative exercise. This is because traditional performance evaluations often fail to forge real professional development, leaving this common management tool feeling like a waste of time from both managers and employees alike. Faced with time constraints and competing priorities, managers may rely on general or long-standing impressions, soften or avoid difficult feedback, or default to broadly positive ratings to avoid uncomfortable conversations.**

It is an understandable approach. But it is also a missed opportunity because when done correctly, performance evaluations can be one of the most effective tools organizations have to support employees and make sound, defensible decisions. Performance evaluations may largely get a bad rap, but that is mostly because they are preceded by poor performance management.

When approached with intention, performance evaluations can do far more than satisfy a procedural requirement. In conjunction with continuous feedback throughout the year, they help create clear, consistent records that support critical business decisions like compensation, promotions, workforce planning, succession planning, professional development and skill building, discipline, and, when necessary, terminations. When performance evaluations are vague, inconsistent, overly subjective, or haphazardly completed as something to check off the to-do list, it diminishes the value of the evaluation itself and actively undermines an employer's ability to defend their decisions.

Performance evaluations are more than just a management tool – they are also a form of organizational risk management that strengthens both employee development and decision-making credibility. So, why are performance evaluations such a challenge for so many organizations? The performance evaluation itself is not the real problem – it is the ability to manage performance properly, where there exist a number of gaps that organizations either do not or cannot close.

## The Credibility Gap

One of the most important indicators of an effective performance management process is alignment – specifically, whether an employee's documented performance history supports the decisions made about their employment. A common challenge arises when there is a disconnect between the two: an employee's evaluations reflect satisfactory or even strong performance, yet a tangible employment decision is made and is based on performance concerns that have little or no prior record.

Situations like this can be difficult to reconcile and may raise questions about consistency and fairness. This is not typically the result of intentional misrepresentation. Rather, it often reflects a tendency to address concerns informally, delay or forego documentation, or soften written feedback. What happens then is over time, a performance narrative is created that can be incomplete at best, and misleading at worst. **Strong performance management closes this gap through consistency.** When feedback is documented as it occurs and is reflected accurately over time, organizations create a performance narrative that is clear, supportable, and aligned with the decisions they ultimately make.

The goal is not harsher feedback – it is more accurate feedback.

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## The Precision Gap

Constructive feedback is most effective when it is clear, specific, and grounded in observable behavior. It is natural to want to deliver feedback in a way that managers hope will preserve relationships, but the truth is that the tendency to favor politeness over precision leads to overly generalized or ambiguous language that can limit its usefulness. While effective evaluations do not require severity, they should be true.

Effective evaluations distinguish themselves by **focusing on observable behavior and its impact,** supported by specific examples. For example, describing an employee as "unreliable" introduces subjectivity and invites interpretation. By contrast, documenting that "three project deadlines were missed in the last quarter, requiring reassignment of deliverables to meet client commitments," provides a factual foundation that is far more useful for coaching, accountability, and documentation.

This approach also reinforces an important distinction: evaluations should evaluate the work, not the person. Language that veers into personal descriptors, even positive ones, increases the likelihood of perceived bias. Focusing on actions, outcomes, and expectations keep feedback grounded and reduce the potential for misinterpretation.

Equally important is the distinction between observation and opinion. Statements rooted in what can be seen, measured, or verified carry greater weight than those based on assumption. Over time, this level of clarity builds a record that reflects performance as it actually occurred, rather than how it was remembered.

Precision should not be reserved only for corrective feedback; it is equally important when recognizing strong performance. General praise, such as "great job" or "you're doing well," may be well-intentioned, but it often lacks the specificity needed to reinforce what success looks like. Identifying the behaviors or outcomes that contributed to that success, whether it is consistently meeting deadlines or proactively solving problems, helps ensure that strong performance is both understood and repeatable.

## The Documentation Gap

For many organizations, the most meaningful opportunity to strengthen performance management lies in how documentation is approached.

Annual evaluations tend to become the repository for issues that were never formally addressed when they arose, but their effectiveness depends largely on what has been documented along the way. When performance concerns are documented only at the point of escalation, it becomes difficult to demonstrate that the employee had notice of the issue or an adequate opportunity to improve. Conversely, when concerns are addressed informally but not recorded, they effectively do not exist from a documentation standpoint.

A more effective approach is to **treat documentation as an ongoing process** rather than a point-in-time activity. The contents of a good performance evaluation should never really be a surprise to an employee, and capturing feedback as it occurs, through follow-up emails, notes from one-on-ones, or interim written feedback, supports transparency, giving employees a clearer understanding of expectations and opportunities in real time. When documentation is handled this way, an annual evaluation becomes less about recollection and more about confirmation. It helps reflect an established pattern of performance that avoids introducing a new narrative and sets the plan for professional development planning, both in strengths and opportunities for improvement.

The good news is, that doing so does not require a complex system; it simply requires consistency and discipline in how feedback is recorded. Managers should document performance as it happens rather than relying on their memory to reconstruct it later.

## The Bias Gap

Performance management is inherently influenced by human judgment. But the opportunity here lies in pivoting bias to strengthen your performance management, not weaken it. Marcus Buckingham, the Head of People + Research at the Roseland, N.J. based ADP Research Institute, says, “Every single human alive today is a horribly unreliable rater of other human beings.”[1] In that spirit, the simplistic approach is not to ignore biases or pretend they don’t exist, but to be aware of them and intentionally reject them.

For example, managers may often unintentionally place greater weight on recent events, allowing one particularly strong or weak attribute to influence an overall rating on a review, or compare employees to one another rather than against defined expectations. Moreover, personal working styles and communication preferences can also shape perceptions of performance. Allowing them to influence performance management leads to inconsistencies in how employees are evaluated.

The short of it is that the judgment that comes with **performance evaluation should be anchored in structure**: clear criteria, ratings that are supported by specific examples, and opportunities for calibration, all of which help ensure performance is assessed more consistently and equitably.

Another component of reducing bias is ensuring that managers are adequately trained – not only on rating scales or forms – but on how to deliver constructive feedback, have difficult conversations, and manage performance effectively. Providing structured training, along with opportunities to practice these skills, helps build confidence and consistency, making it more likely that evaluations, and performance management as a whole, are accurate and aligned across the organization.

## The Visibility Gap (Remote Work Considerations)

Remote and hybrid work environments introduced new considerations for performance management, particularly around visibility and communication. When managers have less direct visibility into employees' day-to-day activity, they may rely more heavily on perception: who is the most responsive, who is the most visible in meetings, and who communicates most frequently. But these factors do not always provide a complete picture of performance, and a lack of physical oversight does not mean that your only option for seeing the unseen is to micromanage or take what is at face value.

Remote work introduces additional boundaries that managers must navigate differently than in in-person settings. For example, the opportunities for feedback may be reduced, making it easier for misalignment or performance concerns to go unaddressed. Organizations that thrive in remote environments **implement intentional strategies to ensure performance is observable**. Structured check-ins, clearly defined goals and metrics, and the use of collaborative tools to track progress are all ways to maintain visibility into work output and accomplishments.[2] Dependably applying these practices to both positive achievements and areas for improvement strengthen the reliability of performance management, reducing the risk of incomplete or inconsistent documentation, ensuring employees understand expectations, and providing defensible support for any employment decisions.

## THE ESSENTIALS

- ✓ Credibility
- ✓ Precision
- ✓ Documentation
- ✓ Bias Awareness
- ✓ Visibility
- ✓ Accountability
- ✓ Consistency
- ✓ Alignment
- ✓ Development
- ✓ Continuous Feedback

## Closing the Gap

Performance management does not need to be complicated to be effective, and performance evaluations do not have to be the scapegoats for bad performance management. By focusing on clear, behavior-based feedback, maintaining consistent documentation, and applying thoughtful processes, organizations can transform performance management into a meaningful and reliable tool – one that supports employees, strengthens decision-making, and holds up when it matters most.

In that light, the question is not whether performance evaluations are a useful tool, but rather whether organizations are leveraging their potential to make performance management count. ■

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## References

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