

**HONEST PERFORMANCE
CONVERSATIONS**

The Highlights

Threshold Communications Ltd
with Aviva Plc
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ThresholdTM

Why 'Honest Performance Conversations'

Most appraisals fail in their objective and most managers overrate how effective they are

Recent research by YouGov in the UK, on behalf of Investors in People (Bosses Hide the Truth at Appraisals) shows that most employees consider appraisals to be a waste of time. This is because managers performing the appraisal fail to confront important issues honestly.

When Threshold asks managers to rate the general effectiveness of honest performance conversations in their organizations as a whole, most rate this as below average. On the other hand, most managers rate themselves as above average at delivering honest performance conversations. We can construe from this that most of us tend to overrate how good we are at honest performance conversations.

Threshold has spent many hours observing appraisals and feedback conversations, followed by interviews with participants. Through this we have garnered an increasing body of knowledge about what works and what does not.

Why humans are ineffective at Honest Performance Conversations

Most human beings are ineffective at giving performance feedback. (There is plenty of research to back this up), but when we look at the parameters of human nature that are consistent in most people this is hardly surprising:

- We want to be liked
- We are 'wired to please'
- We dislike evaluating another human being, like a piece of machinery; it feels uncomfortable and impersonal in nature
- We humans love being in rapport with other humans; we will do anything to sustain it and we hate to break it
- We fear that differentiating performance may cause dissonance, discontent and envy among individuals in the team. (In reality it is failure to acknowledge underperformance that causes the greatest harm to climate.)

Most feedback is simply not frequent and timely enough. Our minds best respond to frequent near term feedback and reward mechanisms, whereas most appraisals are formal and infrequent.

This suggests that rather than simply putting the emphasis on the design of the appraisal process, organizations need to put at least an equal emphasis on creating a culture of honest performance conversations.

Why most training makes the matter worse

What's more many of the techniques in which managers and leaders are currently trained are actually counter-productive and, far from leading

to greater credibility and clarity, they have quite the reverse effect. This is Threshold's contention based on our experience and observation.

Threshold contend that, like any discipline, the leadership and coaching industry develops its own 'kind of blindness' over time (to steal a phrase from the psychologist, William James.) We observe that two common misconceptions appear to have commonly taken hold. It may be that these are not a true reflection of the concepts in which people are being trained, but the points below represent frequently observed themes. The misconceptions are:

- The way in which to highlight under performance is via open questions (on the basis that it is more effective to encourage the recipient to draw out conclusions about her performance.)
- Feedback that enhances performance should be intentionally positive; and drawing attention to under performance is detrimental
- Frank criticism should only be given if it can be softened by the 'praise sandwich'

The problem with the principles above is that they are based on a flawed understanding of human psychology. The human mind tends to cling to the version of reality that gives the most comfort, not the greater truth. We have a remarkable ability for self-deception, especially when under pressure or when we are under performing.

Contrary to popular belief there is little evidence that excessive praise leads to better performance and some evidence that it can be detrimental. Feedback that is most actionable is that which is most discrepant from the subject's perception of current performance.

Finally, the praise sandwich tends to 'contaminate' both parts of the message, resulting in mixed message and little or no performance effect.

Where most of us go wrong

The latest evidence from the field of psychology backs up what we observe in our research. The most common pitfalls are:

- The failure to achieve clarity and common understanding when there is a shortfall in performance, versus the expectation
- The tendency to focus emotional energy and attention on attempting to move below par performers to average while neglecting above average performers
- Assumption and a failure of enquiry

While there are myriad different types of performance conversations, they most frequently centre on the points above or closely related points. Giving managers effective and readily useable tools to deal with these conversations, will give them the blend of tools and techniques that they will require for virtually all performance conversations.

The benefits of tackling the issue

There is a wealth of evidence that effective performance feedback is a key factor in determining performance. Our view is that by tackling this issue, the benefits that organizations are likely to see are:

- Less 'passive-aggressive' behaviour as people learn to deal with situations openly and constructively
- Improved effectiveness and efficiency as under-performance is addressed
- More effective use of your talent resource as people more readily play to their strengths and are not left to remain in roles in which they are underperforming
- A more motivating environment as performance expectations are clear and people feel respected and listened to

How Aviva tackled the issue

Karen Stafanyszyn, Head of Talent and Performance at Aviva, talked about the way in which Aviva had tackled the issue, initially within the UK, and as word about the effectiveness of the programme spread, increasingly across the world: Including Aviva USA, Aviva India, Aviva Asia Pac and Aviva Canada.

Aviva took managers through a half-day workshop, followed by a series of day-to-day practices to hard-wire effective habits, around Honest Performance Conversations, into their minds. Karen recommended workshops take place off-site. She recommended around twelve participants per workshop to gain maximum impact. (Psychologists' research indicates that twelve to twenty are the lower and upper parameters at which delegates can achieve a sense of personal connection with other participants attending the workshop.) The workshop and the follow-up activity were delivered and designed by Threshold.

The role of the workshop

People need a rite of passage, a symbolic stake in the ground that marks a change. Threshold's technique is to work with managers and 'immerse' them in an experience of what the new straight-talking culture will look like. These events are designed to allow people to draw conclusions for themselves about what will be required of them to make the changes succeed. Tools and techniques include:

- Simulations that allow participants to explore the impact of different styles.
- Interactive theatre to help participants to think through methods to influence, persuade and confront underperformance
- Creative exercises to provoke understanding of the impact of various different communication styles and approaches
- Techniques to appeal to people's inner motivations

We combine methods from a range of disciplines, some practical psychology, interactive drama and role-play and communication techniques developed by professional performers.

Interactive theatre

We find that interactive theatre is a particularly powerful tool to help individuals through personal change. So often, to help us to gain insight into a situation and to plan our course of actions, it helps to step aside and view a comparable situation, taking place in a parallel world. The process allows people to gain more profound insight because it takes the toxicity out of a situation while retaining all of the relevance.

Most crucially, the day is an opportunity to practice in a safe, but high-pressure environment, with professional actors, so that participants go forward with a remarkable degree of confidence.

Sustaining the change

Increasingly Threshold has been developing techniques to sustain and prolong learning, following the workshop. This deploys a number of techniques used by cognitive-behavioural psychologists, who use them to help individuals to support themselves through change. For example, participants try behavioural experiments. These may entail behaving very boldly or out-of-character in a given situation and becoming aware of one's feelings and the impact on others.

We encourage delegates to commit to informal support networks, to help one another on their journeys. We pioneered the method of asking a colleague to become one's conscience.

The role of the conscience

There is evidence that a relationship with another individual, who listens, asks crucial questions and constructively challenges, is a vital component in helping a person to change. This is a technique used by counsellors in the field of personal change and we have increasingly pioneered its use in corporate environments with remarkable success.

Participants are asked to select an individual, who has been with them on the workshop, to act as their conscience. These individuals are called 'consciences' and there is strong evidence, where people work closely with their conscience, they achieve a more substantive longer-term change.

WHAT THE HONEST PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS WORKSHOP COVERS

Starting with integrity

The appraising manager or coach learns to start from a position of genuine integrity. This requires a degree of self-knowledge and mastery of one's emotions. Human beings have evolved exceptional antennae when it comes to guarding against being exploited or manipulated. If a manager seeks to exploit or manipulate, it is likely that he will be ineffective.

Re-establishing commitment to common interests

To prevent defensiveness and anxiety, the communicators frequently, and at crucial points, will reaffirm that the underlying reason for having, what may be an uncomfortable dialogue, it is to achieve the best outcome for both of the individuals involved.

Setting out your stall

Effective performance conversations start with honesty and clarity. This reduces defensiveness and suspicion and enhances the credibility of the person undertaking the conversation.

Too frequently managers fail to establish credibility at the outset. They start by the technique of asking, 'So how do you think it's going?' We have, after all, all been trained in the importance of open questions. In reality, starting a conversation like this, when we have a clear point of view to share, either takes the conversation in a haphazard direction or creates mistrust.

Establishing safety

With the body language secrets that we share, managers become better and better at sensing, when a person is becoming defensive or when a conversation is at risk of becoming adversarial. We ensure that participants then become well versed in the techniques and methods for re-establishing safety.

Pacing and leading the conversation

Participants will develop non-verbal techniques to be able to take control of the climate, pace and direction of a meeting, in a way that retains rapport with the client. They will get to understand and practice the ways in which simple, positive feedback loops (signs that are almost too subtle to be noticed) can encourage both participants to move towards a given desired outcome.

Taking up positions

We enable participants to become aware of when they are taking up positions and the way in which this encourages others to become more entrenched in their positions. They also become more aware of 'generative listening'. This is the process of listening purely to generate better solutions.

Constructive confrontation

Too many leaders are ineffective at handling conflict or confrontation. We enable managers to use techniques to deal with gaps in expectations, broken trust or conflicting interest in a way that has impact, but allows the relationship to progress constructively.

Listening and Building Rapport

'Effective meetings are built on rapport not agreement'

Participants recognize the methods for developing authentic rapport as opposed to the pit-falls of inauthentic rapport. They develop the capability to seek out and make genuine connections.

Breaking rapport

While building rapport is the foundation of effective performance conversations, breaking rapport can serve as the ace in the hole. Great communicators are comfortable breaking rapport, at judicious moments. Most people have a strong instinct to maintain rapport even when this dilutes impact or weakens messages.

Influencing and persuading

Almost all leaders make the same fundamental mistake when it comes to influencing and persuading others. They believe that the harder and stronger they argue, and the more evidence they marshal, the more they will be able to positively move others. In fact, precisely the reverse is true. When we argue harder, we further entrench others in their positions.

Beware of false attribution

As humans we have an innate tendency to attribute the behaviour of others to their character or disposition, when in reality the causes are more likely to be due to the circumstances or situation. Psychologists call this the fundamental attribution error. It is called fundamental because it is so common. Most of us do it, without ever being aware of it.

Differentiating between the incident, the pattern and the consequences

Feedback during a performance conversation should draw on facts that illustrate the points being made. However these conversations

can disappear into deconstructions of specific events. A skilled communicator recognizes that the real issue is the pattern and its consequences, and becomes more effective at keeping the conversation focused on these, more relevant areas.

Clarity and removing ambiguity: So what does it look like...

We observe that, while communication and language used often gives the impression of being positive and purposeful, it is often rendered fairly meaningless by being generic and opaque.

We challenge managers to be specific, brief and clear. We also challenge many of the assumptions of what good communication looks like in a performance situation.

Consequential questioning

The efficacy of a conversation is often down to the effect of the questions one asks. Most leaders recognize this, although in reality they are often quite ineffective with their questions. We train them in the concept of consequential questioning. Elementary training differentiates between open and closed questions, however many open questions are equally ineffective. Consequential questions get under the skin of issues and promote the recipient to think more deeply.

Consequential questions are open, yet they are precise and clearly directed to the areas that matter.

Managing inner levels of confidence

Managing ones inner levels of personal confidence is a crucial element in holding meaningful performance conversations. Confidence enables us to confront potentially difficult, sensitive or confrontational situations in a constructive way. Conversely lack of confidence leads to avoidance behaviours, whereby we side step discussions of this nature.

Avoidance leads to an immense waste of potential in most organizations. Evidence shows that people who report to managers who are higher in self-confidence tend to perform better.

ABOUT THRESHOLD

We help teams and companies to transform their performance by shaping the way they think, feel and work together. We combine techniques used by professional performers with the latest thinking in cognitive psychology.

In short, Threshold specializes in communication and behaviour change. This means increasing personal effectiveness at the individual level and creating the culture you need to succeed at a team or company level.

Our work is particularly relevant when an organisation faces any of the following challenges:

- Improving communication
- Increasing motivation
- Engaging teams
- Changing culture
- Turning leaders into communicators

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