

Researcher builds a better job performance review

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A critical job performance evaluation can have a negative effect on any employee, a Kansas State University researcher has found.

By studying how people view positive or negative feedback, Satoris Culbertson, assistant professor of management, has determined that nobody—even people who are motivated to learn—likes negative performance reviews. Culbertson is developing ways to help managers improve the process for reviewing employees.

Culbertson and [collaborators](#) at Eastern Kentucky University and Texas A&M University surveyed more than 200 staffers who had just completed performance reviews at a large southern university. The research appears in the *Journal of Personnel Psychology*.

The researchers first assessed employees' goal orientations:

- Learning goal-oriented people like to learn for the sake of learning. They often pursue challenges despite setbacks.
- Performance-prove goal-oriented people want to prove that they have competence to perform a job.
- Performance-avoid goal-oriented people want to avoid looking foolish.

The researchers hypothesized that that the two types of performance-oriented people only would be satisfied with performance appraisals in which they received positive feedback because negative feedback would

make them look bad. But the researchers thought that learning goal-oriented employees would be satisfied with an appraisal in which they received negative feedback because these individuals would see it as a learning opportunity.

"Surprisingly, we found that learning-oriented people were just as dissatisfied with an appraisal that had negative feedback as the performance-oriented people were," Culbertson said. "Nobody likes to get negative feedback—even those individuals who aren't trying to prove anything to others, but instead are just trying to learn as much as possible."

The research shows that managers need to be careful when giving feedback to employees, Culbertson said. Performance appraisals can affect motivation, commitment and performance, which managers should keep in mind when evaluating employees.

"It is not so much that the performance review needs to be abolished, but we need to fix what is broken," Culbertson said. "Instead of limiting ourselves to formal performance appraisals conducted once or twice a year, we need to think about performance management as a system that is linked with the strategy of the entire organization."

Rather than making a performance review an annual event between a supervisor and employee, employers should consider making it an ongoing process.

"We can actually make the most out of the system," Culbertson said. "But if we are only going to have once-a-year evaluations, we shouldn't expect it to work."

Based on the research, Culbertson has several suggestions to help managers construct performance evaluations:

- Focus on constructive feedback instead of negative feedback. While negative feedback focuses on what an employee is doing wrong, constructive feedback brings in elements for improvement. "Negative feedback is not the same as constructive feedback," Culbertson said. "We should be careful that negative feedback is provided in a way that is more constructive because it can help people try to improve."
- Be careful with number-based performance reviews. People view numbers differently, Culbertson said. For example, on an evaluation with a 1-to-5 scale, a manager might give an employee a 4 out of 5. The manager might see this as positive feedback, but an employee might see this as negative if he or she is striving for a 5 out of 5. "This is where our words are really powerful," Culbertson said. "We want to make sure we are conveying to employees whether we are giving a good evaluation or describing something that needs to improve."
- Avoid the "sandwich" approach. This approach occurs when managers provide positive feedback, then give [negative feedback](#) and finish with positive feedback. "Sometimes the sandwich approach comes across as dishonest or not something that people will buy," Culbertson said.

Provided by Kansas State University

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