

# Turning annual performance reviews into 'humble encounters' yields dividends for employees and managers

December 8 2023, by Michal Lehmann and Taya Cohen

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Every year, employees worldwide enter annual performance reviews with mixed feelings. Do employees enter these conversations with

enthusiasm to learn new things? Rarely. Are managers eager to have these conversations and coach their employees on how they can improve in the coming year? No.

These meetings are typically experienced as [difficult conversations](#). Opportunities for learning and relationship-building are often missed.

In an ideal world, [employees](#) would learn and improve from the feedback their manager provides in the annual review. But there are at least two obstacles that can stand in the way of that best-case scenario.

It can be hard to hear painful truths. Critical feedback [can trigger defensive reactions](#): That's wrong. Who are you to say? This is a disaster, and I'll never be able to improve.

And, even if employees are receptive to the intended message, they may have [trouble understanding the information](#) and face difficulties implementing the feedback to improve their performance.

In an effort to get through, [managers](#) may try to soften their delivery. For example, they may use the much-maligned "[feedback sandwich](#)," which bookends a critique between two compliments. But this tactic can obscure truthful and useful information, resulting in confusion, misunderstandings and worse.

We [study organizational behavior and are especially interested in](#) how people interact and communicate at work. Drawing from our research on [humility](#) and feedback, we suggest a new way for managers to approach performance reviews: Create what we call "humble encounters."

By expressing [humility](#), managers can transform performance reviews from monologs into dialogues, with greater learning and improvement as a result. Our studies indicate that when a team member expresses

humility to a co-worker, it leads their partner to feel greater "[psychological safety](#)"—more comfortable sharing candid opinions and concerns without worrying about backlash or [negative consequences](#). This, in turn, helps improve [performance in the team](#).

## Creating humble encounters

Humility has [a few key ingredients](#): You must be willing to view yourself accurately, as you really are. But that's not enough to create a humble encounter. You must also show that you are teachable by exhibiting openness to feedback, ideas and suggestions. Finally, it's critical that you acknowledge and express appreciation for the contributions that others make.

So, how might a manager do all this in a performance review?

You can signal that you're willing to view yourself accurately by sharing [personal experiences](#) of dealing with challenges: "I also struggled with this issue when I first entered the company." By sharing your own challenges and how you worked through them, you signal that you're aware of your own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, as well as your strengths and achievements.

You can signal teachability by demonstrating that you're open to learning from others. Managers can use what organizational culture experts [Edgar and Peter Schein](#) call "[humble inquiry](#)"—asking questions you don't already know the answer to, listening intentionally and responding with curiosity.

Be mindful of assumptions implicitly conveyed to the listener by how you phrase your questions. [Negative assumption questions](#)—like "What triggers you to argue with your co-workers?"—presuppose a problem. The employee might be surprised by this question and the assumption

behind it because they don't remember the last time they argued with someone at work. A negative-assumption question can help clarify undesirable behaviors if they are indeed happening, but at the same time it can [signal distrust](#) and hinder the receptivity of the receiver.

Another way to express humility is by [good listening](#). It includes [three crucial elements](#): paying attention to the speaker, showing positive intentions toward the speaker, and demonstrating that you understand their message. Managers who listen well to their employees elicit [better performance and establish stronger relationships](#) with them.

Spotlighting an employee's strengths and contributions is active acknowledgment of the employee's value without the manager devaluing their own. During the annual review, it's possible to recognize an employee's strengths while still providing developmental feedback.

Managers should provide support by conveying a [sense of care, understanding and validation](#): "I'm giving you these comments because I have [very high expectations, and I know you can reach them](#)." Using language that communicates support fosters trust and a sense of belonging, thus breaking down walls of defensiveness.

## **Humble encounters enable growth**

By modeling humility, managers provide employees with [two key, seemingly contradictory signals](#).

They show relational acceptance—a signal that they accept the employee as they are, thereby calming feelings of threat and defensiveness. At the same time, they also communicate an expectation of change. Learning and improvement are not only possible but necessary for the [employee](#) to reach their full potential in the job.

In response to managers' humility, [employees will reciprocate humble behaviors](#), showing more willingness to view themselves accurately, be teachable and appreciate others' contributions.

Managers might be concerned that expressing humility might signal weakness. However, research shows that this is not the case. When leaders are perceived to be humble, they are also [seen as effective, competent and charismatic](#). Therefore, being a humble leader has benefits not only for employees, but also for the leader's reputation.

Humble encounters can transform annual reviews into a more positive and enriching experience for both managers and employees. By enacting the three key aspects of humility—a willingness to view yourself accurately, teachability and appreciation for others' contributions—you can both change your employees' learning curve and strengthen your relationship with them.

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