

GAO

Office of Counseling and Career
Development

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Dealing With Difficult Feedback Situations

Foreword

The following guidelines have been prepared to assist GAO managers in dealing with difficult interpersonal situations that may occur during performance appraisal and annual assessment feedback. The guidelines provide proactive strategies, general do's and don'ts, and three typical situations managers may encounter during feedback sessions.

If you have questions about the material presented or wish assistance with particular situations that you are facing, please contact a counselor in the Office of Counseling and Career Development (OCCD) at 275-8992.

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Strategies to Minimize Extreme Reactions

Preparing for the Feedback Session

- Prepare the physical setting for the session. It should be conducted in private without interruptions and with adequate time. Have all pertinent documents and materials at hand.
- Prepare ahead of time what you want to say and how you want to say it.
- Go into the meeting with a positive frame of mind. Clear your own mind of whatever else has happened that day. Be prepared to spend the entire time focused on the employee.
- Eliminate any personal bias, or at least be aware of any such emotions and attempt to hold them in check.

In the Session Itself

- Be empathetic with and respectful of the person but clear in terms of the message you want to deliver.
- Listen carefully to what the person has to say. Use reflective listening and skills taught in the Skills for Performance and Career Development workshop. Research has shown that in counseling interviews, the average manager talks as much as 85 percent of the time. For the feedback session to serve its purpose, the manager has to be an effective listener, as well as talker.
- Allow the person to express feelings. If the person starts to cry, gets angry, or is silent, allow this to happen. Allow the person to deal with the information in whatever manner he/she needs to. This does not mean that it is OK for the person to attack you.
- Focus on performance and not personalities. Feedback should be objective and behaviorally oriented. Avoid lengthy discussions of Pay for Performance (PFP), perceived unfairness of the organization, specific information about others in the unit, etc.

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General Do's and Don'ts

When you have done everything you can do to minimize the chance of an extreme reaction and the employee becomes angry, upset, or withdrawn nevertheless, try to remember these general do's and don'ts.

Don'ts	Do's
Don't become defensive or counterattack.	Remain objective and focus on the person's performance.
Don't allow yourself to be pressured into doing or saying things you wish you hadn't, e.g., changing a rating or disclosing specific information about others.	If necessary, take a break or schedule a follow-up session to avoid doing something hasty.
Don't accuse the person of being overly emotional or reactive.	Communicate your awareness of the person's behavior, e.g., "You're being very quiet" or "You're obviously upset."
Don't feel obligated to handle a difficult situation by yourself.	Consult OCCD if you're not sure how to proceed or refer the employee to OCCD.

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Coping With Specific Extreme Reactions

Following are three situations you may confront in the performance feedback process: the angry employee, the complaining/denying employee, and the silent and withdrawn employee. In each of these scenarios, it is important to assess the intensity of the employee's reactions and use the following tips to help you cope with those that seem extreme.

Anger

Assessing Its Intensity

Mild to moderate reactions: The person quickly blows up or vents pent-up feelings; the person complains mildly or expresses signs of upset with the rating. These reactions are relatively short in duration.

Extreme reactions: The person expresses lengthy, escalating anger or blames, accuses, or threatens.

Coping With the Extremely Angry Person

- Goal: Get the person to calm down enough to have a constructive conversation.
- Calmly acknowledge the person's behavior, e.g., "You're yelling at me" or "You seem extremely angry."
- State your position clearly, e.g., "I know you think that you deserve a superior rating in writing. However, on the basis of your performance, I feel strongly that you're at the fully successful level."
- If the person continues to be on the attack, refuse to be pressured, e.g., "I would like to have a productive discussion about this. How can we best do that?"
- Avoid counterattacks; they will only add fuel to the fire.
- Determine if it's possible to continue the conversation constructively. If not, reschedule a time in the near future.

Complaining and Denial

Assessing Its Intensity

Mild to moderate reactions: The person complains mildly, initially denies the accuracy of the rating, and/or tries to blame "the system."

Extreme reaction: The person's complaining and/or denial completely dominates the conversation. There is excessive blaming of you, others, or "the system."

Coping With the Extreme Complainer/Denier

- **Goal:** Get the person to begin acknowledging responsibility for his/ her performance.
- State what you see happening, e.g., "You seem to be spending a lot of time attacking the PFP system; I would prefer to focus on your performance and what can be done, if anything, to help you improve" or "Let's focus on the factors that most affected your final ranking."
- Restate the facts without apology, e.g., "I know you think that your writing is superior, but the fact is we've had to do extensive rewrites with each of your major projects this year."
- Put the ball in his/her court. Ask what he/she can do to make things better in the future.
- Ask what the person would like to get out of the discussion.

Silence and Emotional Withdrawal

Assessing Its Intensity

Mild to moderate reactions: The person seems thoughtful or appears to be processing the information and coming to terms with it.

Extreme reactions: The person withdraws completely. There is prolonged silence. The person seems shocked, stunned, or silently hostile.

Coping With the Extremely Silent/ Withdrawn Person

- Goal: Get the person to increase his/her participation in the conversation.
- Identify the person's behavior, e.g., "You seem very quiet."
- Ask what he/she is thinking.
- Ask open-ended questions, e.g., "How would you like to proceed from here?"
- Express support and reassurance.
- If the person still does not respond, ask if he/she would like to schedule a second meeting when he/she has had time to think about things. Be sure to schedule the meeting before the person leaves and state its purpose, e.g., "Maybe you need time to think about this for a little while; let's schedule a meeting at so we can discuss this further."

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