

# RCI's Fearless Performance Coaching Conversation

This is an abbreviated edition of the more detailed *Performance Coaching Conversation* included in *Fearless Performance Reviews* (McGraw-Hill Publishers, 2014)

## A. Supervisor Prepares for the Check-In Coaching Conversation

- Review the job description to verify its accuracy. Ensure that it describes *great* performance outcomes. Consult with HR if changes are warranted.
- Consult the employee's performance portfolio and other documentation of performance.
- Assess the employee's performance overall and within each dimension and then define your objectives and desired outcomes for the upcoming conversation.
- Review the performance measures you are using to assess the employee's performance in each responsibility area.
- Complete a *draft* version of the performance review form (if appropriate). Clearly identify performance areas where you need more data from the employee and note any assumptions you may be making as you determine your preliminary assessment.

## B. Employee Prepares for the Check-In Coaching Conversation

This phase prepares the employee for either the *Check-In Performance Coaching Conversation* or *Annual Review Coaching Conversation*. Ask the employee to review each of her **core job duties and organizational responsibilities** and her **performance portfolio**. Encourage her to talk to her peers and customers to gather their perspectives on her performance as part of her preparations. Ask her to consider the following questions to encourage critical reflection and help build ownership and accountability for performance outcomes.

1. **What is going well with the job?** This question can include variations such as: What on the job is working? What are some of the good things that are happening in each of your job responsibility areas? What recent accomplishments are you especially proud of? What in the job do you feel good about? **Why is it going well?** What forces or factors are helping you achieve and sustain your successes?
2. **What *isn't* going well in the job?** What about the job isn't working as well as you'd like? What job problems or difficulties in any of your job responsibility areas have you experienced lately? **Why isn't this going well?** What are the likely causes of performance challenges? If you are experiencing performance challenges, what might be the causes of these things not going well?
3. **What changes or improvements could you make in how you do your job to help improve things that are not going well?** What could you do to address the causes of things not going well?
4. **How might I (your supervisor) help you to be more successful in your job?** What can I do more or less of to enable you to achieve your performance goals?
5. **What do you see as performance areas where there may be a need for new responsibilities and future growth in performance?** This question invites him to identify new responsibilities or growth areas that are driven by the organization's strategic goals, new customer expectations, new technological capacities, etc.

## C. Conduct the Check-In Coaching Conversation

1. **Welcome the employee to the conversation.** Set the tone for the rest of the session. Begin by reiterating the reason for the “check-in” conversation, your goals for the session, and the reasoning behind your desire to have him share his performance self-assessment first — before you share your assessment.

You might start out with language such as:

*“As I mentioned to you the other day, I’m planning to have more frequent coaching conversations with everyone on our team. These discussions will help me better understand everybody’s concerns, needs, and issues. It also gives me a chance to clarify my own thoughts and expectations. As you recall, several days ago I asked you to think about a number of questions in preparation for today’s performance coaching conversation.*

*“My intention in asking you to think about these questions was to encourage you to do a self-assessment of your own performance, to encourage some critical reflection on your past work, and to get you started thinking about things both you and I could do to support your performance in the future.*

*“My preference would be to have you start things off — because I’d like to hear your thoughts about your performance rather than simply reacting to my assessment of your performance — and then, after you’ve shared your responses to these self-assessment questions, I’ll add my comments. Does that sound okay to you?”*

*“So, to get started, I’d like to hear your thoughts about what is going well in your job overall and in each of your key performance dimensions . . .”*

2. **Explore what’s going well and why.** Ask the employee to highlight her strengths — what’s “going well” with her performance and why it’s going well. Use active listening skills and ask clarifying questions to improve your understanding of what she has said. Ask for more information and explore the reasoning behind her conclusions.
3. **Present Your “Going Well” Thoughts:** After he is finished with his self-assessment of his strengths . . .
  - Discuss your thoughts and observations. Link your observations concerning his behavior and performance with his self-assessment whenever possible.
  - Identify additional areas not mentioned where you think he is doing well.
  - Explain the data and reasoning behind your statements.
4. **Explore Areas for Improvement and the Causes of Performance Difficulties:**
  - Ask her to discuss (a) *areas for improvement* (what isn’t going well) in her job overall and in specific performance dimensions and then to (b) share her ideas for possible *causes* of performance problems in these areas.
  - Use active listening to gather valid information, explore her reasoning, and verify your understanding of what she has said.
5. **Present Your “Improvement Desired” Thoughts:** Following his ideas . . .
  - Present your own thoughts and observations — linking (as much as possible) what he stated with the improvement areas that you have observed for his performance overall and for each responsibility area.
  - Share the data behind your observations and explain your reasoning. Identify additional performance areas for improvement using specific examples, data, incidents, etc.

- Identify any assumptions you are making and ask him for alternative interpretations of these assumptions.
  - Use constructive feedback and focus on specific, observable, and measurable performance outcomes and behaviors rather than on abstract terms like commitment, attitude, dedicated, and so forth.
6. **Seek Acknowledgment of Performance Problems and Discuss Consequences:**
- If improvement in specific performance behaviors or outcomes is part of your goal, get her to acknowledge that a change in behaviors or performance outcomes is desired.
  - If she does not agree that there is a problem with performance or that a change in behavior is necessary, have her state — in her own words — the *consequences* of **not** changing her behavior or outcomes.
  - Explain the reasoning behind your request in that by thinking through these consequences on her own, she might better appreciate their meaning and impact.
7. **Discuss the Employee's Ideas for Future Action:** Once both of you agree that one or more improvements in performance are warranted . . .
- Ask him if he understands what the goal is for each performance area and to identify possible actions that he could take to address performance issues and move his performance closer to the desired outcome.
  - Assist him in defining and refining the performance goal and identifying ways to measure success.
  - Follow his ideas for action with your own. Link your recommendations with his ideas as much as possible. Explain the reasoning and intentions behind your suggested actions.
8. **Discuss Your Support for Improvement Actions:**
- Ask her to identify ways that you can be most helpful in supporting her efforts to achieve the performance goals.
  - Follow her ideas with your own. Link your comments with her ideas as much as possible. Explain the reasoning and intentions behind your ideas for additional support for her efforts.
9. **Explore Employee Ideas for Accepting New Responsibilities and Growing the job in New Directions:**
- Invite him to share his ideas about new directions and responsibilities for his position and areas for future growth and development in his role to better respond to the organization's requirements for the future.
  - Test any assumptions you are making about these ideas. Inquire into the employee's reasoning behind the new responsibility and growth areas.
  - Add your own ideas regarding new responsibilities and directions and the behaviors and outcomes that may be required of the employee in the future. Explain your reasoning and intentions behind these suggestions.

## D. Come to Mutual Agreement

As the coaching conversation winds down, bring the ideas you've discussed together by having each of you summarize what you each have committed to do to support the employee's current performance, improvement in performance, or move performance to a new level or in a new direction.

1. **Summarize Key Next Steps.**
2. **Reiterate Areas of Mutual Agreement.**
3. **If this is the more formal *Annual Review Performance Coaching Conversation*:**
  - If appropriate, indicate that your next step will be to finalize the performance review form based upon today's discussion and that you would like to schedule another meeting to discuss your final performance rating.
4. **Offer Employee Assistance Program if Warranted:** If you suspect that there may be a *personal* problem behind his performance issues, reference EAP services.
5. **Determine the Next Check-In Performance Coaching Conversation:** Establish a follow-along schedule for future *Check-In Performance Coaching Conversations* to discuss her performance progress and provide additional support if needed.
6. **Conclusion:**
  - End the coaching conversation by expressing appreciation for his performance and/or his commitment to performance improvement.
  - Reiterate how helpful today's conversation has been at helping you understand how best to support his future performance.
  - If desired, indicate that you will be following up on this meeting with an e-mail or memo summarizing what you both have agreed upon.

## E. Follow-up and Monitor Performance Progress

After your conversation, make sure you take the following actions:

1. **If desired, summarize the key conclusions and actions agreed to** during the coaching conversation in an e-mail or memo and send this to the employee, inviting her to talk with you if she has a different understanding of the results from your conversation. Alternatively, invite the employee to send you a summary e-mail.
2. **If this is the formal *Annual Review Coaching Conversation*:** Complete and finalize the performance appraisal form based upon insights gained during your coaching conversation and, if desired, schedule a follow-up meeting with him to present your final performance ratings.
3. **Follow-through** in providing or supporting the training, information, equipment, etc.
4. **Observe him in action and reinforce positive behaviors and outcomes.**
5. **Continue tracking performance outcomes**, gathering performance data, and documenting results in performance logs and in her performance portfolio.
6. **Reward any degree of performance improvement.** Reinforce all positive behaviors and outcomes — as long as they are moving the employee toward his performance goals.
7. **Conduct *Check-In Performance Coaching Conversations as needed*** to discuss her progress and, if called for, identify new performance expectations and directions and renegotiate performance goals as required.

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