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Performance Evaluations: Honesty is Always the Best Policy



When it comes to performance appraisals, telling little white lies to protect an employee's feelings or to avoid a confrontation is not the way to go. In fact, some legal experts say it can land you in court.

But unfortunately, court dockets are full of wrongful termination suits filed by employees who were fired for performance problems that managers either glossed over or never mentioned in performance evaluations.

"We've found that employers aren't being honest on their employee reviews," said Antoinette S. Gilbert, an associate labor and employment law

attorney with [Karen Smith Kienbaum & Associates](#) in Detroit. "But when you're not honest it comes back to bite you later."

If an employee has subpar performance, you may very well have legitimate reasons for terminating that person, Gilbert said.

But if you've provided good reviews that don't accurately reflect performance issues, "all of a sudden your legitimate business decision for firing them looks like a sham."

Providing less-than-honest performance evaluations also can damage employee morale because other employees observe that poor performance is not addressed, Gilbert said. On the other hand, providing employees with honest appraisals helps reinforce good behavior, provide motivation, boost the bottom line, and recognize top performers.

"If you want to shape behavior, you have to give feedback," she said.

By performing evaluations of your entire staff, you also can spot trends over time by comparing the reviews, said Gilbert. Oftentimes, such a comparison will reveal the need for additional staff training.

When evaluating employees, Gilbert also says the following tips are helpful to keep in mind:

- **Keep it simple.** Generally speaking, the task of writing employee performance evaluations is not on most managers' list of favorite tasks. A simple, straightforward approach is best and encourages more willing participation.
- **Tailor the review.** Take a look at the essential functions included in each job description and evaluate employees on how well they are performing the required tasks and duties for that particular job. For example, the performance evaluation for a production employee might be a one-page document that focuses on basic skills required for line work, whereas an appraisal for a secretary at the same company might be a multi-page document that focuses on skill level for various administrative tasks. Regardless of an employee's position, however, be sure to base the evaluation on performance, not the individual.
- **Keep it consistent.** Make sure that performance evaluations are performed on a regular basis. Managers sometimes want to do an appraisal as a "knee-jerk reaction" following an employee performance issue, but disciplinary action is the more correct approach in such a case. You also want to decide how often you're going to perform evaluations and how many you're going to do at any given time. Keep in mind that cost doesn't have to be a deterrent when it comes to evaluating employees: in reality, performance reviews don't have to be tied to pay increases – the two processes can be separated.

Written by [Jenny Cromie](#), certified human resources specialist (CHRS)

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