
Professional Development

ABOUT PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS

Performance evaluations – most people don't like them and many dread them. Speaking at the September 20 program, "Reading the Tea Leaves: How to Get the Most Out of Your Performance Evaluation" sponsored by the Career Advancement and Management Committee and moderated by Amy Pasacreta of Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP, panelists tried to dispel some of the anxiety of receiving an evaluation and provide tips on how to prepare for and get the most out of the evaluation.

Preparing for the evaluation

Though the performance evaluation may only happen once a year, the panel agreed that it is something you should be preparing for throughout the year. Keep a journal, suggested Mary Crane, of Mary Crane & Associates, LLC. In it list all the things you do, note the outcome of your projects, and your accomplishments as well as the skills you gained working on a particular project.

Says Crane, also keep a file of e-mails, letters and notes which express thanks or kudos for the work you have done. By doing this, when it comes time for your evaluation it will be easier to remind yourself and perhaps your evaluator of the activities you have participated in and the skills you have gained in the past year.

However, don't forget the importance of developing an ongoing relationship with the person who will be giving your evaluation, reminds Crane. Regularly update her or him on the work you are doing. The journal should serve as a reminder of your work. The evaluation should not be the first time your evaluator hears of your work and accomplishments.

What to ask the evaluator

It is best to ask specific behavior-based questions, notes Marcie Elias of Elias Consulting LLC. For example, what specifically about my performance was good? What tasks didn't I perform well? Are there things I should start doing, stop doing or continue doing? If the evaluation is negative try to elicit constructive feedback by asking, what could I have done to have made the review more positive?

Questions like these will help make it clear which skills you need to develop. Remember, says Elias, the person evaluating you may not

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have experience or be skilled at giving constructive feedback. Posing questions like these can help the evaluator provide valuable feedback, and your evaluator may even appreciate the help.

What not to say

Though it can be tempting, the panel agreed, the evaluation is not the place to raise the issue of compensation or promotions. Instead, suggests Sandra Bang, director of Professional

Development and Training at Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP, ask how to get the assignments that will help get you the skills you need to succeed.

If you receive a negative evaluation, says Bang, remember to stay open and calm. If a comment is factually wrong it is fine to say so but if you feel it is an unfair judgment don't be defensive or argumentative during the evaluation. Rather, take some time to reflect and then ask for a follow-up meeting so you will be able to discuss the issues when you will be more composed.

What to do after the evaluation

Following the evaluation you should go through a three-step process, says Steve Armstrong, Director of Career Development at Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP: skill building, relationship building and self examination.

The first step, says Armstrong, when you walk away from the evaluation is to be honest with yourself and admit your flaws. Comments from the evaluator can often be abstract. Talk to your mentors or people who know your skills well who can tell you what next steps you need to take to build your skills. Even ask clients for feedback such as, how could I have made this process work more smoothly for you?

Next, take relationship-building steps. Ask for help developing skills from those senior to you. Ask for assignments that will allow you to develop those skills. Doing this creates a dialogue and strengthens your relationship with partners. Find out about what resources are available through the firm or law office to improve your skills, such as writing or speech courses.

Finally, says Armstrong, comes self-examination. Stop and ask yourself, is this really what I want to do? It is hard to take charge and successfully develop your career if you don't enjoy what you do.

Remember, concluded the panel, your employer expects you to make mistakes. What counts most is how you handle the mistakes and improve on your weaknesses.

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