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Rebecca Houghton, CEO, Bold HR



Judgement day

Traditional performance reviews are due for an overhaul, giving way to more effective methods of workplace evaluations between management and their teams. By **John Burfitt**

There's one thing most people in business will agree on—the annual performance review will never win any popularity prizes within the workplace.

Not only are performance reviews not popular, but they're also considered a waste of time by an overwhelming majority of workers.

According to a survey by the US leadership training and research firm, Leadership IQ, only 13 per cent of employees and managers, and six per cent of CEOs, believe their organisation's performance appraisal system is useful.

Which is, Melbourne training consultant Louise Davis says, such a missed opportunity for everyone involved. Davis says performance reviews should be a valuable process that both practice managers and their teams look forward to, rather than dread.

The root of the problem, she says, is in the outdated way performance reviews are often still conducted.

"Most managers I work with admit they would rather be on the receiving end of a root canal treatment than put the effort into a performance review,

and that's because they have no idea how to do it," Davis says.

"So if the managers don't know how to approach a review, and they stumble and bumble through the process with each team member, it's little wonder reviews are so universally disliked. And yet, it shouldn't be this hard as there are far smarter, and successful ways to do it."

The first thing that needs to change is the traditional performance review model of one annual event where managers and staff meet to evaluate the past year.

"That model needs to be thrown out as it simply does not work," Davis says. "What is far more effective is to schedule regular conversations throughout the year with each team member, so managers can clearly outline their expectations about performance and outcomes, and then assist each person in setting goals and achieving outcomes.

"A 30-minute scheduled chat once every month will achieve far more in keeping everyone on track. It will also make the manager more aware of what is really going on in the practice, and also gives each staff member the

opportunity to check in with questions or issues they have. It's about setting up a strong communication system, and being consistent."

Attention also needs to be paid to the way such catch-up reviews are framed within the workplace, dental consultant Julie Parker of Julie Parker Practice Success says.

"These conversations should be structured more as a coaching session, highlighting where that team member is, what the goals are and what they need to do to get there," she says.

"These sessions should be motivating and an opportunity for growth and progress. This should be the time to look at where that member of staff is, what's going well and what needs work.

"Highlighting what is going well and where improvement can be applied will go a long way to make that person feel both appreciated and valued, but with a clear idea of what they need to do next to bring their standard up."

Establishing this as a regular part of the practice routine will result in marked changes throughout the year, Parker adds.

"Identifying behaviours that are aligned with the expectation of each role, with added direction of what can be improved upon, means the support

is there but there is also accountability as you are both keeping an eye on the outcomes," she says.

"It also should be creating an environment where everyone—the manager included—is on a path of constant improvement. This is a good opportunity for the boss to lead by example."

All of which sounds impressive on paper, but this process can cause just as much anxiety in some managers as the traditional annual 'big meeting approach', claims Bold HR's CEO Rebecca Houghton.

Regular conversations about goal setting, performance standards and achieving outcomes might be interpreted as micromanaging and overly time-consuming in a busy schedule, but if done correctly, Houghton advises, it can deliver better staff engagement and successful practice management.

"This is when to take the approach of being a constructive coach and a mentor, so your business functions in a much smoother way and managing it becomes far easier in the long run," she says.

"If the manager makes the time to help develop their staff's skills throughout the year, you enable them to do more work as an individual and

achieve far more across the practice. That should, ultimately, mean less work for the manager, which is why having these regular conversations can prove to be a smart investment of time."

Rolling out this review model throughout the year should culminate in one annual performance review that's kept brief, Houghton adds.

"If you've been talking throughout the year about what is and is not working, there should be no major surprises at this point," she says. "This approach takes the high stakes out of it and should normalise expectation setting and the entire reviewing process."

Louise Davis recommends that if adopting a new management process appears intimidating, it's best to start out small. "This is all about changing the mindset about management, and that can be a big adjustment, so just do one thing at a time," she says.

"Start with small conversations to get the ball rolling and better communication happening. It's about being patient and knowing that as you get better at it, the process will get better as well. By the end of the first year of working like this, the business should be operating more effectively and with a team far more engaged as a result." **Bite**



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