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# Become an Effective Software Engineering Manager

How to Be the Leader Your Development Team Needs

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The  
Pragmatic  
Programmers

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Development Team Needs

James Stanier  
*edited by Adaobi Obi Tulton*



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*Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.*

► Søren Kierkegaard

## CHAPTER 6

# The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

What's that familiar feeling of worry as you check your calendar for the next few weeks? Ah yes, that's right: it's review time. You remember your first performance review at your previous company. Those butterflies in your stomach as you stood outside of your manager's office. The look of dread on the face of your colleagues as they exited the room. Your sweaty palm as it touched the cold door handle. It was awful. Entering the room, you sat down in the chair in silence while you waited for your boss to speak.

"So," he said in an inquiring tone. "How do you think you've done this year?"

"Erm, pretty well, I guess."

"Interesting," he replied. A long pause followed. It hung in the air.

It was probably one of the most uncomfortable hours of your working life. It felt like an interrogation. You had your view of the last six months extracted out of you by an individual playing both good cop and bad cop simultaneously. You ran through the main features that you worked on. You thought they all went pretty well, but all he did was find holes to pick in them. You talked through some of the areas in which you could have done better. There was no comment. At the end of the meeting you had no idea whether you'd done well or not.

"Oh, and one more thing: 3% increase this year. It'll be in your January pay."

You catch yourself daydreaming and bring yourself back into the present moment. You look at your calendar and realize that it's not just one review you need to sit through this time around. It's *seven*. And *you're* the manager. Oh dear. Do you really have to adopt that horrible persona and drag your



staff (and yourself) through hour after hellish hour? Surely there has to be a better way...



Well, there is. Performance reviews need not be painful. When done well, reviews can be reflective, full of praise and constructive criticism, and act as a springboard for the future. They can further strengthen the relationship between you and your staff. As a manager, you're on the other side of the table, so you have the opportunity to deliver valuable sessions for your staff. And it just so happens that you're in luck, because that's exactly what this chapter is going to be about. We're going to give you everything that you need to know about giving great performance reviews, from preparation to the meeting to what happens afterward.

It can be challenging to be in the manager's seat for the first time. But you should see this as an opportunity to be the manager that doesn't fill their staff with dread when it's review time. The good news is with some knowledge and careful preparation, you can become a master at doing performance reviews. With time, you may even look forward to doing them, since they're an opportunity for a deep conversation about personal development and goals.

But let's get one thing straight: very few people like performance reviews. They're essential yet often unpleasant—a trip to the proverbial dentist. Yet, despite the unpleasantness, they're the best opportunity that you have to push your top performers further and course-correct those that are underperforming. Use them well, and your staff will only get better. Use them badly, and you'll be in for some very awkward conversations.

Here's what we're going to cover in this chapter:

- *Myth busting.* First off, we're going to break some common misconceptions and myths about performance reviews.
- *Preparation.* We're going to break down everything that you need to do before the meetings into easily implementable chunks. Since you'll be managing lots of documents and emails in the lead up, we'll give you a simple tracker system to keep on top of everything that's in flight.
- *The written review.* We'll explore how the written review should be structured, including how much you and your staff should write. You can use the template in this chapter for your own reviews if you wish.

- *Peer feedback.* Getting a broad selection of opinions from others is just as valuable (and sometimes *more* valuable) than the feedback that you give your staff yourself. We'll look at how to collect it and you'll get an email template to use.
- *What to do on the day.* Then we'll cover the meeting itself, making sure that both you and your staff get what you need from the conversation.
- *Money.* This part of the review is often handled badly. We'll show you how to cover this tricky part of the conversation so that it lands well for both you and your staff.

So, are you ready? You'll realize that reviews aren't that bad after all. Let's get started.

## Myth Busting

Before we go any further, we're going to consider some misconceptions about performance reviews. Part of the reason that reviews can suck is because both parties are going in with a mindset that hinders rather than helps. Let's have a look at some incorrect assumptions that people can have around performance reviews—from both the reviewer and the reviewee—so that you can understand how to not repeat the mistakes of others.

### Myth 1: Reviews Are for Managers to Give Top-Down Feedback

A review is not a one-way debrief. It's not the parole board at the prison giving their rubber-stamped verdict on whether an inmate can walk free. Reviews should be a *two-way* process. In the weeks leading up to reviews, both you and your staff will put in the time and effort to prepare. They will reflect on their performance and so will you. You will collect peer feedback for them so you can discuss it in partnership with them. They will be given the space and opportunity to talk about their goals for the future.

Remember that in the review process you, as a manager, are the *facilitator*. You are not the dictator. Deliver a stellar service to your staff, not a judgment.

### Myth 2: Reviews Are Just a Thing That the Company Does

Yes, it may be the case that it's your HR department that sends out the notifications when it's time to prepare for performance reviews, but it does *not* mean that reviews are just a thing that you should unwillingly do to check the box. Performance reviews are an essential part of your toolkit as a manager to ensure that your staff are supported, given opportunities to talk in depth about their careers, and to continually set goals. Even if the company



was not making you do your reviews, you should do them anyway. In fact, if they only mandate them happening once a year, then you should probably do them every six months regardless. We'll touch on the frequency of reviews shortly.

Reviews are absolutely worth your time. You should engage fully with the process and also make sure that your staff do too. This is because:

- They are the best opportunity to set the bar for what you expect for the next six months.
- They are your best chance to apply course correction if your staff aren't going in the right direction.
- They build trust and rapport through their introspective nature.

### Myth 3: Reviews Only Really Matter for Underperforming Staff

That's not true. In fact, it's quite the opposite! Reviews are not there to make sure that staff that aren't performing get the proverbial kick that they need to do better. Reviews are for *everyone*. Each of your staff deserves the chance to sit down with you and contemplate where they've been, where they are, and where they're going. The people that benefit from reviews the most are your highest-performing staff. By giving them the time and space to explore their career, combined with your support and input, you can ensure that your superstars continue on their high-growth trajectory.

Reviews are not for nitpicking negatives. They are for praise, critique, planning career goals, and dreaming about the future, and your best performers need your time and energy more than anyone else.

### Myth 4: Since People Hate Reviews, Get Them Over and Done with Quickly

Wrong! People hate reviews because they are often done badly, not because reviews themselves are bad. Don't assume that everyone hates reviews. Also don't assume that even if people hate reviews that they'd rather skip them or do a cut-down version of them in order to check the box and move on with their lives. Engage fully. Always give reviews your utmost attention and prepare and deliver them with the same detail and passion that you give to the projects that your team is working on.

Part of your challenge as a manager is to turn even the most skeptical members of staff into ones that actively look forward to reviews. This chapter will show you how.

### Myth 5: The Review Should Be a Surprise on the Day

Five minutes before the review, your member of staff should not be sitting there nervously, staring at the meeting room, filled with dread about what is going to be revealed. In fact, it should be the opposite. Most of the time that goes into performance reviews happens before the actual meeting. You'll see how both of you will contribute to a written document that will allow you to record your thoughts in a concise and considered way and allow plenty of time for your opinions to be exchanged beforehand. You'll also see how to collect and compile peer feedback so that your member of staff has a more complete picture of their performance to discuss.

When it comes to the meeting, the pertinent information should have already been expressed, chewed over, and understood. It should never be a surprise.

### Myth 6: Reviews Are Used to Deliver Pay Raises

Reviews should not be the grand unveiling of pay increases. It's time for you to decouple the delivery of pay and performance, despite the fact that the two are conceptually coupled. Keep the performance review about the performance only. You'll see why this is beneficial to both you and the person that you are reviewing, but you'll also see how it opens the door to there being other more sensitive ways of delivering salary adjustments.

### Myth 7: Reviews Are the Only Place Where Performance Is Discussed

A common bad practice is to use performance reviews as the only place where discussion about performance happens. What you actually want is for you and your staff to have open and transparent conversations about performance—good and bad—all throughout the year. The emphasis of performance reviews should be on the *review*. They're a checkpoint to talk about the time period that has passed and the one that's coming up next. Yes, that does involve talking about performance, but it should only be one of the *many* times that you visit the topic as the weeks and months go by. To an extent, there should be no surprises in what you discuss with your staff, and vice versa.