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Be a Catalyst

Fostering Painless Performance Conversations

One person can be a change catalyst, a “transformer,” in any situation, in any organization.

—Stephen R. Covey

Employees initially come to work for a paycheck, but few stick around just for the money. In a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, 53 percent of employees listed pay as a very important aspect of their job satisfaction. At the same time, more than half said relationships with an immediate supervisor were a critical factor in their job satisfaction. Studies have repeatedly shown that employee satisfaction is directly linked to employees' relationships with their immediate managers. As a manager, you have a direct impact on employee retention and engagement, workplace morale, and organizational culture.

An important part of your job as a manager is to tap into the passion that brings employees to work each day. When those passions are engaged and employees feel valued, they are likely to perform at higher levels. One reason employees stick with an employer, and with you as their manager, is the feeling of being valued. Employees are eager for your feedback, and your job as a manager is to provide them the reinforcement they crave.

But let's be realistic. You also have a really heavy workload. You are constantly juggling your focus between your own work and your employees' needs. As a result, it's easy to lose sight of one of the most critical roles that *you* play: a catalyst, someone who drives initiatives forward and provides a spark for change, serving as an igniter of passion. Catalysts help *others* take on more responsibility, rather than taking it on themselves. When you act as a catalyst, you help others function independently and confidently so that you can focus on moving the work group's and the organization's goals forward.

As a manager, you wear many hats, including technical expert, budget balancer, customer service champion, organizer of the work, scheduler of assignments, conflict resolver, problem solver, coach, mentor, and cheer-leader of employees. At times, you play the role of counselor. At other times, you take on the job of mediator or facilitator.

Painless Perspective

As a manager, your first job is to be a catalyst, a spark for change.

However, the most powerful role you can play is that of a catalyst. As a catalyst manager you inspire, excite, and nurture an engaged work culture. You use your influence as a catalyst manager to create a positive environment

Table 1.1 Catalyst Manager versus Typical Manager

Typical Manager	Catalyst Manager
Maintains status quo	Seeks new and better results
Gets work done	Creates new opportunities
Completes defined goals	Establishes new and challenging goals
Preserves	Promotes
Sustains performance	Takes performance to the next level
Reinforces accepted ideas	Provokes new thinking

where each individual excels to the best of his or her ability. When you think of yourself as a catalyst, you become a more effective manager. Table 1.1 lists some distinctions between typical managers and catalyst managers.

The Primary Tool of Catalyst Managers

Being a catalyst for action and change requires you to take on some difficult tasks, such as defining your performance expectations clearly for your employees. Catalyst managers challenge the status quo regularly, and this task is next to impossible if your employees are not on board. Most important, catalyst managers have frequent, meaningful conversations to influence performance. Any one conversation has the potential to shift an employee's perspective, to influence that person's choices, or to affect his or her performance.

Have you ever avoided a conversation with an employee about something because you were uncomfortable bringing it up? Customer service issues, attendance, hygiene, poor work quality, lack of teamwork . . . each situation calls for the conversations you should be having, rather than avoiding. As a catalyst manager you can use conversations to shift the status quo.

Painless Perspective

As a manager you automatically have an impact on others. The nature of your impact is up to you. Be a catalyst.

Employees Want Meaningful Conversations

The research organization *Leadership I.Q.* found that 66 percent of employees said that they have too little interaction with their bosses. Sixty-seven percent of employees said they get too little positive feedback from their bosses. In summary, roughly two-thirds of the workforce says they want more quality interactions with you. They want to know more about what you're thinking, and they want to know how they're doing.

It's clear that employees want meaningful two-way conversations that help them be successful. They want to know that they are adding value to the organization and that their passions and efforts are recognized and appreciated.

Specifically, employees want from you:

- A vision of how their work fits into the big picture
- Your time and attention
- Feedback that will help them improve
- Recognition of their efforts

Painless Perspective

Employees need and want your perspective so that they can be successful.

Painless Performance Conversations Defined

This book will help you learn to lead even the most difficult performance conversations with confidence. Regardless of the subject, or the seriousness of the issue, performance conversations can be painless for both you and the employee. This book will show you how.

The definition of a *painless performance conversation* is that it is a conversation with a *person you care about* concerning an *issue you are concerned with* where the *outcome is uncertain* and the *situation requires your influence*.

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Painless Performance Conversations

Let's break down the definition to explore what this really means:

1. *You care about the person.* In the workplace, the people you care about are those who are important to your success and to the success of the organization. You have a performance conversation because you care about the other person professionally. You care about his or her success because it leads to *your* success as a manager, which ultimately leads to the success of your organization. You may not be friends, and you don't really have to like the employee. You do, however, care about the employee professionally, or there would be no need for the conversation. Because you are in a professional relationship with the employee, you care.
2. *You are concerned about the issue.* Performance conversations help you accomplish your goals and support larger initiatives. Whether you are focusing on your organization's broader mission or your individual goals, conversations drive initiatives forward. Painless performance conversations are those where the issue cannot be ignored and a resolution needs to be found. As a catalyst manager, you use conversations to drive these issues forward. Your effectiveness in leading conversations about employee successes and failures will ultimately determine your own effectiveness, value, and promotability in your organization.

You want people walking away from the conversation with some kernel of wisdom or some kind of impact.

—Harry Dean Stanton

3. *The outcome is uncertain.* When the outcome of the conversation could go in multiple directions, the uncertainty makes the situation uncomfortable. Likewise, when the solution to the problem is not evident or when you don't know how the employee is going to react, the conversation has the potential to be painful. Painless performance conversations typically begin with an uncertain outcome, but you pursue them because something needs to change.
4. *The situation requires your influence.* You wouldn't be thinking about having the conversation if something hadn't caught your attention. Whether it is output that is not up to quality standards or team member interactions that are not positive, if something isn't right in the workplace, you have the ability to have an impact on the issue. Speaking up with the intent to sway, disturb, or alter the status quo is the job of a catalyst manager. Painless performance conversations are ones in which your influence will ultimately have a positive impact on the behavior of others.

Ultimately, painless performance conversations are those that cause employees to make a shift. They have a tremendous impact on a work group because they allow everyone to move forward. The affect of any one conversation may initially be small, but no matter the immediate outcome of a performance conversation, every conversation will have an influence. Be a catalyst.

Subjects of Painless Performance Conversations

Painless performance conversations can relate to any workplace issue, including those that begin like this:

- “We’ve received customer complaints about your work.”
- “Your response to that customer complaint created additional problems for our team.”
- “Your colleagues have complained about an offensive odor coming from your cubicle.”
- “You are not meeting your production quotas.”
- “You have contributed to the team producing results at levels that are lower than we’ve seen in the past two years.”
- “You have shown a pattern of tardiness.”
- “The records indicate that you have been using your cell phone and computer for personal business.”
- “We needed your assistance, and we couldn’t locate you for 2 hours.”

Reflection Question

What performance conversation do you need to have with an employee right now?

Avoiding Performance Conversations

Painless performance conversations are the day in and day out, formal and informal exchanges that you have with employees that help them meet or exceed your expectations. Most of these conversations are already painless,

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Painless Performance Conversations

and you tackle them with ease. The potentially painful conversations are usually preceded with thoughts like:

- “If I don’t mention this issue, maybe it will go away.”
- “I don’t have time to deal with this right now.”
- “I think I’ll just wait and see what happens.”

You may be tempted to avoid certain performance conversations. However, the impact of not taking action can have tremendous consequences, including:

- Nothing changes!
- The problem gets worse.
- Customer service suffers.
- Team morale is negatively affected.
- You lose credibility up and down the chain of command because problems are being ignored.
- The employee’s behavior may negatively affect others on the team.
- Important changes may not be implemented.
- Lack of conversation stunts the professional growth of you and the employee.
- Avoidance creates an appearance of favoritism.
- You or others experience increased stress.
- The employee’s workload may shift to others, creating inequities.
- The employee’s or coworker’s physical safety could become jeopardized.
- A legal liability may be created.

If those reasons are not enough to convince you to address performance issues immediately, consider the financial impact on your organization if employees were more productive—even if by only 1 percent. Imagine your payroll costs are \$1 million a year and you improve employee performance through conversation by just 1 percent. The bottom line impact would be at least \$10,000. What could you do with an additional \$10,000 in your budget? If employees are less productive than they could be, what is the cost to your organization and to you as a manager?

Let's Apply It

Complete the form describing a performance-related conversation you need to have with an employee. The conversation can be about anything related to improving an employee's performance.

Your Performance-Related Conversation

With whom do you need to have a performance conversation?	What issue(s) need to be addressed?	What is the impact to you if you do not have this performance conversation?	What is the impact on your organization if you do not have this performance conversation?	What is the impact to the employee if you do not have this performance conversation?

As you continue to read *Painless Performance Conversations*, refer back to this personal example to assess your readiness for the conversation. In the upcoming chapters, you will learn concepts and tools that will help you to more clearly frame and address your situation.

Painless Performance Conversations and Painless Performance Evaluations

The job of managing employee performance is not a one-step task. It is the ongoing and continual responsibility of every manager. Performance conversations are a critical element in the larger process of performance management. How you handle them will determine whether they are painful or painless.

Painless Performance Conversations

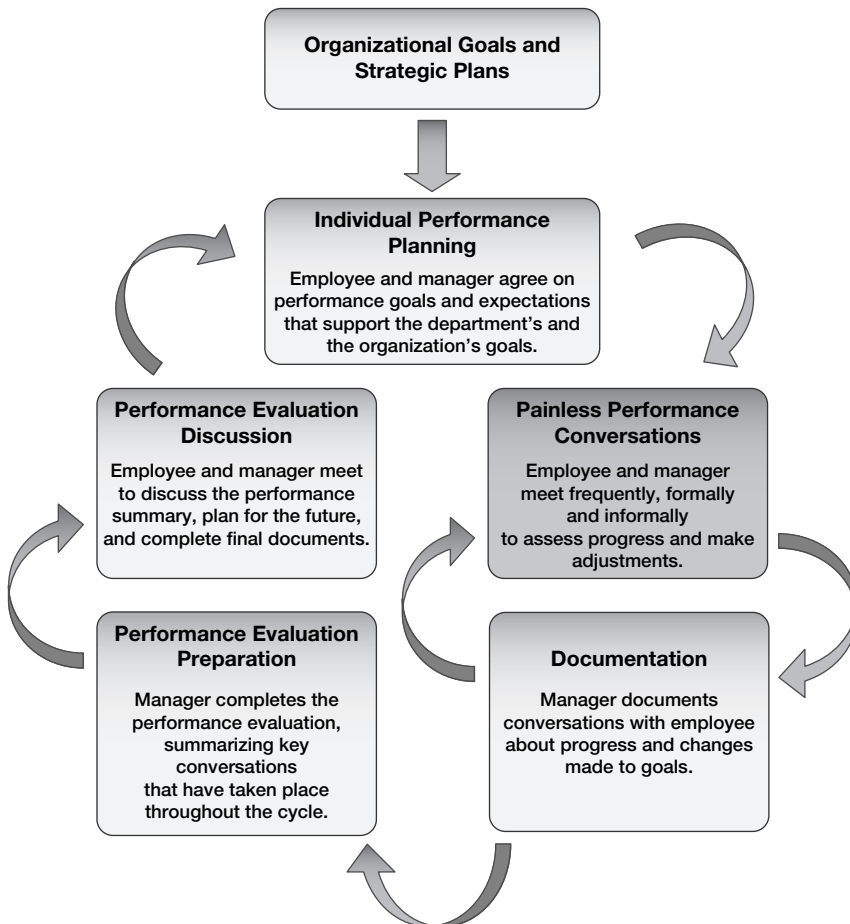


Figure 1.1 The Performance Management Cycle

Typically, performance evaluations are completed once per year or on some other interval determined by your organization. Well structured, they are based on predetermined criteria or expectations that are usually linked to job performance standards or organizational objectives. Performance evaluations are best prepared as a summary of the conversations you and the employee have had throughout the year. The performance management cycle illustrates this concept (Figure 1.1).

Performance conversations are not a replacement for a performance evaluation, and the performance evaluation is not a substitute for regular performance conversations. Regular performance conversations, adequately documented, make it easy to have a painless performance evaluation because

the end-of-the-year conversation is a summary of the previous conversations and the employee isn't surprised by its content.

What's Ahead?

Although many books and references have been developed to guide managers through difficult conversations, the painless approach is simple. The first step is to set clear expectations that define success. Chapters 2 through 4 will give you the tools you need to define your expectations and then convey them in a way employees understand and support. In Chapters 5 through 8, you will explore the four mind-sets required to confidently master performance conversations with employees:

- Lead with Behavior: Separating Actions from Attitudes
- Eliminate Judgment: Focusing on Performance Evidence
- Inquire with Purpose: Using Curiosity to Expand Possibilities
- Be Clear: Creating a Culture of Ownership

Once you have mastered the mind-sets necessary for a painless performance conversation, Chapter 9 will offer you the best approach for initiating the conversation, following a simple road map to keep you from getting sidetracked. Finally, Chapter 10 illustrates specific performance conversations you may encounter.

Conversation Checkpoints

- As a manager, you are the catalyst for change in your organization.
- Employees want to have conversations with you. Foster an environment that is open to painless performance conversations. Initiate them.
- Avoiding a performance conversation will affect you, the employee, and the organization.
- Performance management is a continual process.
- Performance conversations are the link between day-to-day performance and the performance evaluation.

From the Field

From Bill, City Manager:

I hired a manager who had great recommendations and a strong reputation as a leader in his field. The new manager got off to a strong start by hiring staff and developing a project plan for the team to follow. Along the way, however, the manager ignored important procedures and created conflicts with managers in other departments. He occasionally threw his own team members under the bus if they were not “in line” with his vision.

I had plenty of excuses for not addressing the manager’s performance sooner. Other issues distracted me. I gave the manager the benefit of the doubt based on his reputation and recommendations. I let the issue go on for too long.

When I finally took time to check in with the team, I learned that the new manager was making their lives miserable. Several high-potential team members quit before I was able to address the issue. I had done too little, too late.

In the end, I learned that it was my job to stay connected with the performance of the entire team, as well as with the performance of the managers I relied upon. Having regular conversations with the manager about his team and its progress would have given me the opportunity to deal with these issues before they became nearly impossible to resolve.

Sound Bites from the Field

If Bill had initiated a conversation with the manager sooner, it may have started like this:

I noticed that the reconciliation process that the team has developed was not followed last month. I also heard that you and David had a heated argument about the Williamson project on which both of your teams are working. These two issues concern me. What happened?

Just initiating conversations about these issues and others would have opened the door to a dialogue with the manager about his approach. Bill may have been able to head off some of the problems the team faced had he engaged in these conversations sooner.

Lessons Learned from the Field

Bill learned a costly lesson when he allowed the new manager to do whatever it took to get the job done. By not initiating performance conversations as the issues arose, Bill:

- Lost good staff
- Lost productivity
- Increased the cost of the operation
- Lost revenue
- Decreased employee morale

Along the way, Bill probably lost the respect of others in his organization who were affected by the new manager's ineffectiveness. Only Bill could influence the situation, and eventually he realized his ability to be a catalyst for change. It's never too late to begin addressing performance issues through conversation.

Next Up

In Chapter 2 you'll explore what may prevent you from initiating performance conversations, and you'll learn how to differentiate between your personal pet peeves and true performance issues.

