

Feedback and Reviews Can Be Complicated in a Hybrid Workplace

By Holly Rosenkrantz

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As managers look to a post-pandemic workplace—and the likelihood of a mix of onsite and remote work—Brian Kropp is worried about the loss of the "serendipity moments" in offering feedback to workers.

"Managers often give informal feedback walking out of a meeting, and coaching on the walk in," said Kropp, chief of research in the HR practice at Gartner, a research and advisory firm in Arlington, Va. "Remote work has a mechanism for formal reviews, but I am worried those crucial hallways moments are going to go away."

With increasing vaccination rates and a drop in COVID-19 cases, managers are planning what work will look like in the next and perhaps closing phase of the pandemic. Workplace experts predict there will be an increase in hybrid working, in which managers and employees split their time between working onsite and working at home.

A survey of 9,000 workers by Slack's Future Forum found that only 17 percent want to go back to work five days a week at the physical worksite. "Most people want flexibility. They want access to [the worksite] for team building and a break from home, but the ability to work from home more often," said Brian Elliott, a Slack vice president and a leader of the Future Forum.

This kind of change upends how managers handle feedback and reviews, which are a key element (www.shrm.org/ResourcesAndTools/hr-topics/people-managers/pages/ongoing-performance-reviews-.aspx) of their job. While managers adapted their review and feedback processes to the sudden move to remote working when the pandemic hit (www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/remote-work-has-become-the-new-normal.aspx) in March 2020, now they are figuring out how to coach and handle sometimes delicate feedback in a climate when some people are at home, some are at the worksite sporadically and others are onsite full time.

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Workplace experts say managers can't simply take their feedback and review processes from before the pandemic—or from the onset of the pandemic—and adapt them to the emerging hybrid workplace. "We're going to have to create a whole new series of approaches and processes to make it work," Kropp said.

Some managers scheduled too many Zoom check-in meetings as companies shifted to a completely remote setting earlier in the pandemic, Kropp said. He noted that managers discovered that remote feedback meetings several times a week made workers feel as if they were being micromanaged and managers didn't trust them. Having a weekly one-on-one virtual meeting for 15 minutes or a half hour may be "all that is needed to provide clarity of priorities and commitments and building trust," Elliott said.

But Ben Wigert, director of research and strategy in Gallup's workplace management division, says that more frequent, five-minute informal "quick connect" meetings help workers understand that they are "not out of sight, out of mind."

Elliott points out that managers who adhere to the idea that feedback comes solely from office interactions may lack creativity. The idea of "catching up" around a water cooler, he said, may be a bit outdated.

One alternative managers should try and set up remotely, Wigert said, could be "walking meetings."

"Walking meetings are a great way to catch up with your remote employee in a very unstructured and healthy way," Wigert said. "Find a time that works for both of you to take a phone call from your favorite trail or treadmill." Other options include virtual lunches or coffees, which create an "inviting environment to casually catch up on work and life, and give some light feedback or coaching," he said.

These kinds of moments, workplace experts say, can help managers evaluate their employees without having to observe their work processes. Workers who are more frequently remote may find themselves in a situation in which they are being judged "only on their deliverables," Kropp said.

Being Intentional About In-Person Meetings

That said, "we recommend trying to give performance reviews in person, as well as other sensitive feedback, when possible," Wigert said. At the same time, in-person conversations should not be reserved solely for performance reviews.

Elliott, however, cautioned against using the in-person-only model for performance reviews to cover up poor management skills. "If you are unable to have a conversation with someone about their performance regardless of where they are located," he said, "that is a failure of management."

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Feedback

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