

Facing up to the dreaded question: How am I doing?

Here's how to ask the partners

It's the big question that hangs over every administrator's head: What do the partners think of my performance?

The answer is too often a complete mystery, says one management expert. And the reason is that even though they spend their days in adversarial matters, attorneys hate confrontation in the office, particularly on matters of employment. The last thing the partners want to do is have to appraise the administrator's performance.

Sadly, that puts most administrators at high risk of getting bad reviews or even losing their jobs with no warning.

Don't wait for the axe to fall.

Take the initiative and find out where things stand, says JOAN K. USTIN, a Charleston, SC, management consultant specializing in organization development and human resources. Do a self-assessment and take it to the partners for their opinion.

Even more than saving the job, taking that approach will increase the partners' respect for the administrator. What they will see is that their administrator has an honest desire to perform well, wants to accommodate their needs, and is willing to make whatever improvements they recommend.

Great, super great, not so great

To draw up the self assessment, follow the job description. Or, if there isn't a written description, just write out a list of the essential duties and responsibilities of the job. Then look at each point just as if it were an item in a staff review, Ustin says. Do some reflection on that job requirement and determine where performance has been strong, where it's been just okay, and where it needs improvement.

Write it all down and then look for verification. Her advice is to turn to a trusted co-worker or even to an attorney in the firm and ask the following three questions:

- What do you think I do well?
- Where do you think I've exceeded the firm's expectations?
- Where do you think I'm falling short of the firm's expectations?

A friend or close colleague will be candid but at the same time supportive, Ustin says. The answers will give a valid preview of the criticism the partners are likely to dole out but in a softer and easier-to-take manner, possibly with suggestions attached. With that information, write out the self assessment. List the main responsibilities of the job and beside each one note the level of success and, if improvement is needed, what the administrator can and will do to make that improvement.

Meet with the bosses

Now it's time to meet with the partners, present the self review, and ask for their opinions.

Don't drop in unannounced. Ask them to schedule 30 minutes to discuss the performance. That should be enough time to go over the self-assessment and get their opinions.

Once in the meeting, be brave, Ustin says. "People tend to be more critical of themselves than their bosses are," so chances are the partners' remarks will be more positive than expected. Don't be surprised to hear "I don't know if it's all that bad, but here's what I see."

Start the meeting with more than just "how do you think I'm doing?" Have an agenda. "Show that some thought has been put into it." Ustin recommends this:

I've been giving a lot of thought to what I've been doing here the past year, and I have some questions I'd like to ask you.

Show the job description and ask:

Are these the main job duties you expect me to be doing?

Take notes. Cross out and add whatever duties the partners mention, and be prepared for surprises – they may be expecting entirely different things of the administrator position. Show the self-assessment. Explain the why of the ratings. Ask for their opinions:

How do you feel about what I've told you? Am I on track here?

Listen and take more notes.

It's not a time for hurt feelings

Now comes the hard part – listening to the partners' critique. There will be praise. But there will also be criticism, "so check the sensitivities at the door." Or at least don't show them. Keep sight of "the greater purpose of the meeting," which is to improve performance.

Ustin also points out that if the partners sense the administrator is hurt or angry or argumentative, they'll never be willing to give the feedback again. To make sure that doesn't happen, be especially careful to avoid two responses.

One is a heated counterattack such as "*How can you say that?*" or "*That is wrong!*" Lash out, "and the meeting will go downhill from there."

The other is "a big gulp" of silence. Clam up, and the partners have no reason to continue the conversation.

Tone of voice makes a difference too. Sounding defensive will only precipitate a fight, not an honest response. When there's a negative remark, listen to it thoughtfully, nod in acknowledgement, and then assess the validity of it in an objective way.

Suppose the partners say "You never get our reports done on time" when the fact is that the reports have always been finished on time except for the past month, and that was due to computer failure.

Be diplomatic:

What you're saying has a lot of validity. The reports were late last month, and it was because the computer did XYZ.

Then present the solution.

I realize that late reports pose a problem, and it shouldn't happen again. This is what I can do to correct it.

Or suppose there's a broad-brush statement such as "*You don't communicate to us very well.*" Ask for specifics, not as proof or disproof but so the issue can be resolved:

Can you give me a specific example of when I didn't communicate with you? That will help me understand what I need to do to correct the behavior.

Ask too for their recommendations for solving the problem:

Do you have any recommendations for how I can better communicate with you?

The partners may have quite a few suggestions but aren't saying anything because they haven't been asked, Ustin says. She cites one dissatisfied client her company had. "No matter what we did, we couldn't meet his expectations." So one day she asked him point blank: "*I feel we cannot satisfy you as a customer. I want to win with you. Tell me what we can do.*"

His response was simply "*You need to keep me informed on the projects.*" That's all that was needed. The relationship improved from there.

Sum it up and follow up

Wrap up the meeting by summarizing the partners' comments:

So what I understand is that these are the areas where you'd like to see improvement (cite the areas). And here is what I'm going to do to make the improvements (cite the suggestions). Thank you very much for taking the time to help me with this. It's important to me.

From there, of course, the job is to make the improvements that have been committed to. When that's done, which may be in two or three months, schedule a how-am-I-doing meeting to show the partners the progress that's been made and also to ask again for their appraisal.

At that meeting, say:

Here are the issues that came up at our last meeting, and here are the actions I have taken that I believe have been helpful. Tell me how you think it's going.

"That closes the loop," Ustin says. The partners know their suggestions have been put into action.

Keep on keeping on

Try to make the meetings a regular event, Ustin advises. That's the most effective way to stay on top of the areas that need improvement and thus continue to be successful.

"Everyone needs to know what's expected and how to do better and grow in the job." Also, she says, an administrator scores points by seeking out the bad news, because it makes it possible for the partners to express their concerns without having to deal with office conflict, which they don't like.

And beyond that, the partners see the administrator as a person with confidence, self-esteem, courage, and maturity. That looks good to any boss, and that leads to more responsibility in the job.

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