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## ProSeminar Top Tips Series

# Leading an Appraisal Discussion

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Leading an appraisal discussion requires a careful, considered and skilled approach in what can often be a tense situation (for both appraiser and appraisee.) The structure of the appraisal discussion (note I have deliberately avoided the word 'interview') may be strongly influenced by the format of the appraisal system, but appraisers need to recognise that the primary purpose is not to complete the paperwork and get it out of the way: rather is to help support and develop the performance of each team member. The focus therefore needs to be on developing a constructive two-way discussion which helps identify any blockages to effective performance, explores opportunities for even greater contribution and leads to specific action.

Here are some pointers:

1. **Prepare yourself and encourage the jobholder to prepare.**  
Think back over performance for the whole period under review. Identify any issues you think you need to raise and look for the evidence both to support and counter your initial thinking. Encourage appraisees to recognise that they have an active role to play and that they need to be prepared to discuss

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the issues they see as vital. If your appraisal system doesn't include some sort of pre-appraisal form for the appraisee develop one for use in your own section.

2. **Ensure the discussion won't be interrupted.**

Divert the telephone and put a 'do not disturb' note on the door.

3. **Choose the right seating arrangement.**

Choose a neutral venue such as a meeting room rather than conduct the discussion across your desk. Avoid putting the seats opposite each other. This can be seen, consciously or unconsciously, as distant and confrontational.

4. **Create a relaxed, but positive atmosphere. Use the 'chat-gap'.**

Start off with a bit of small talk to put you both at ease. If you've got some good news this is a good time to pass it on. But remember the chat gap is a conversational ritual – don't let it drag on too long. Signal the end of the chat gap and move into more formal mode.

5. **Recap on the purpose of the meeting to establish a framework and ensure focus.**

6. **Before tackling any specific issues, provide an overview to re-assure the appraisee.**

Don't start off by asking '*how do you think things have gone*'. This approach puts appraisees in a difficult position. They may fear that if they say things have gone well, and the appraiser turns out to hold a contrary position, their credibility and objectivity may be questioned. On the other hand they may at this stage be wary of pointing to problems which might reverse the appraiser's positive perspective or reinforce a negative one.

7. **Engage the appraisee in the discussion and get him/her talking early.**

As soon as you've given your brief overview pass the 'baton of conversation' over to the appraisee. Use an open question such '*how do you see things from your perspective?*'

8. **Establish a structure and build an agenda together.**

Don't get into detailed discussion about any one topic until you have built an agenda

together. Following your initial exchange of general views, signal the need to build the agenda *'Okay well, we'll need to look at some of these points in more detail. Let's put an agenda together. I've got some items on my list and I'm sure you've got some on yours. What particular things do you want to look at?'* Once the appraisee has completed his/her list, outline your points and suggest a particular structure. Try to create a logical sequence and summarise the points raised as agenda headings. *'Okay good. I want to talk about some of those points as well. I also want to talk about ... Why don't we do it this way? Let's start with ... and then go onto ... Is that okay with you?'* Chose as the first item one of those which the appraisee has raised so that you can once again pass the baton of conversation back. *'Item number 1 was ... This is one of the issues you raised so perhaps you'd like to kick-off.'*

9. **Keep the discussion 'partitioned' - deal with one topic at a time.**
10. **Identify action points for each topic - who is to do what by when.**
11. **Listen carefully, show interest and keep the appraisee engaged.**  
Encourage the appraisee with 'open' questions and keep the conversational balance. Summarise from time to time to maintain focus and check understanding
12. **Look for opportunities to give praise.**
13. **Be constructive in any criticism.**  
Work with the appraisee to work out solutions to problems. Avoid over-criticising.
14. **At the end check for additional items and summarise agreed action points.**  
*'Okay that covers everything on our agenda. Is there anything else we've missed?'* *'Let's just make sure*

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*we've both got the same understanding of the actions we've agreed. Perhaps you'd like to summarise on a point by point basis.'*

15. **End on a positive note. Thank the jobholder.**
16. **Write up your notes and complete any documentation straight away.**  
Don't leave it for more than two working days.

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