**Embrace It**

To be an effective performance manager, you have to embrace your role as a catalyst. In this role, you assume the responsibility to guide your employees toward the organization's goals. You take on the responsibility to provide timely and constructive feedback. You own the responsibility to be honest with employees about how their work is affecting the group.

Embracing your role as a catalyst manager takes guts and focus. Talking with employees about challenges, problems, and failures is often unpleasant. However, it comes with the job of a manager. Having guts to manage means you embrace the responsibility to be honest, consistent, and fair with your feedback.

Likewise, embracing your role as a catalyst means you take full responsibility for the outcomes. Blaming your boss, other people, or policies for not having the conversation only deflects the responsibility that comes with the job. Think about a problem you and your team have faced lately. Did you search to blame someone for the outcome? Did you use external factors that were out of your control as an excuse for subpar performance? Ideally, you used conversation to explore what you and the team could do to positively influence the situation. Embracing your role as a catalyst means that you are constantly looking to resolve issues through conversation, rather than finding excuses for why you and the team can't perform.

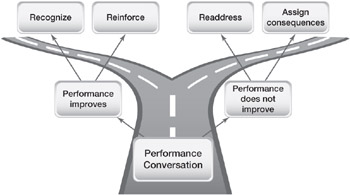
*There are many ways of allowing your thinking to get in the way of your performance and learning, but they all amount to conversations you are having with yourself within your own head*.  
—Timothy Gallwey

On one hand, having a difficult conversation with an employee often results in a sense of relief. It feels as if you can finally check a big item off of your list. You can now move on to the next item on the agenda, right? Not so fast!

Unfortunately, one conversation is rarely the end of the issue. Frequent conversations are part of the continual performance management process. As a manager you must be prepared to have performance-related conversations every day with employees, keeping in mind that conversations are not conducted in a vacuum. A series of conversations might be required to influence the behavior of an individual employee or to affect the overall performance of your team. For example, if the purpose of the conversation is to redirect an employee's efforts, you will need to have a follow-up conversation to recognize improvement or provide further correction. If the employee does not improve, you will need to have a conversation again to redirect the employee's efforts. These performance conversations might be repeated multiple times before you see improvement. And, if the conversations don't result in improved performance, you will need to take progressively stronger steps to influence the behavior you expect.

When embarking on a performance conversation, remember that the first conversation won't be the last. In fact, you may be embarking on a journey that looks like that shown in [Figure 2.1](http://viewer.books24x7.com/assetviewer.aspx?bookid=52830&chunkid=177324117&resumebookmarkid=45fe6ab6-5f9e-e611-a35e-005056862d74).

Larger View



**Figure 2.1:**The Performance Conversation Journey

Finally, as you consider whether it's time for a performance conversation with an employee, ask yourself if you are mentally prepared to go down the road. The road may be bumpy and full of potholes, yet the conversation journey is the only path to performance improvement. It is a road you must go down.

In a perfect world, the road is short and leads to immediate improvement. The employee hears your message and makes the necessary adjustments. However, in certain cases, the road will be a long one if improvement is not made. If you work in a large corporation, a unionized environment, or a public agency where employees have extensive due process rights, the road may be lengthy and arduous. The road will take you to unpleasant destinations such as discipline hearings, mediation, and possibly a courtroom. On this road, your actions as manager will be tested and questioned.

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|  | **Painless Perspective** | Knowing the performance management road will be a long and challenging one, prepare yourself for the journey. |

Before you begin down a potentially long road, there is one more question to consider. Is the employee's behavior really a performance issue, or is it a pet peeve that is bothering you? Sometimes the performance you are focusing on may not be directly related to the work environment. For example, if you are bothered when employees talk over the water cooler about the previous night's game, yet they are able to meet your expectations for performance and serve customers as expected, your concern may be a personal one. You may be the one who has the issue, while the water cooler chitchat is boosting the morale of the employees.

A pet peeve is a minor annoyance that you identify as particularly bothersome, to a greater degree, than others find it. We all have pet peeves. But when does a pet peeve become a legitimate performance issue?

Ask yourself: "Is this issue affecting the employee's ability to meet the established performance expectations? Does it impact his or her ability to provide the service that's expected?" If your answer is "yes," proceed with the performance conversation. If your answer is "no," you have likely uncovered a pet peeve. Asking these questions first, before addressing the concern with the employee, will provide you with the confidence and clarity to proceed.

Here are a few potential pet peeves expressed by managers compared with their potential impact on the workplace:

[[http://viewer.books24x7.com/images/b24-bluearrow.gif](http://viewer.books24x7.com/outputobject.aspx?bookid=52830&chunkid=768103323&objectid=nr-N25&objecttype=spreadsheet) Open table as spreadsheet](http://viewer.books24x7.com/outputobject.aspx?bookid=52830&chunkid=768103323&objectid=nr-N25&objecttype=spreadsheet)

| **Manager's Pet Peeve** | **Potential Impact on the Workplace** |
| --- | --- |
| Employee is too chatty. | Employee disrupts coworkers and the team is not meeting goals. |
| Employee pretends to be too busy to help a customer or answer the phone. | Customers are not being served. |
| Employee gives me the silent treatment for days after we have a disagreement. | There is no impact unless avoiding you affects the employee's ability to accomplish work or effectively support the team. |
| Employee looks bored while working at a public service desk. | This is not a performance issue unless the employee's expression affects customer satisfaction or outcomes. |
| Employee chews gum too loudly. | This is not an issue unless it becomes a distraction for others. |
| Employee leaves the lights on after exiting an empty room. | This may not be an issue unless there is a clear expectation to conserve energy. |
| Employee does not make a new pot of coffee after taking the last cup. | This is probably not an issue unless it is indicative of other behaviors that show a lack of teamwork and regard for others. |
| Employee talks too loudly on the phone. | Employee disrupts coworkers and distracts others. |

The key is to determine how the employee's behaviors are affecting others in the workplace or customers. If there is no direct impact on the work environment, on the organization's image, or on the employee's ability to produce results, the issue is your pet peeve. Any of the aforementioned behaviors may be considered a legitimate performance issue, depending on how it affects the employee's ability to contribute.

**Pet Peeve Formula**

To determine whether an issue is your own pet peeve or a true performance issue, ask yourself:

* What exactly is the **behavior** that is not meeting my expectations?
* How does the behavior **affect** the work environment, the organizational culture, others' work performance, or the employee's ability to meet job expectations?
* What behavior do I **expect** to see instead?

It's easy to be distracted by your own personal irritations. When the behavior that is bothering you affects the employee's ability to be effective or affects others in the work environment, it is worth a conversation. If it doesn't affect the work environment, let it go.

To clarify this further, here are a few examples that illustrate the difference between a pet peeve and a legitimate performance issue.

*Manager complaint*: "It bothers me when employees don't stay current with e-mail and other communications."

Begin with the three questions in the Pet Peeve Formula:

1. *What exactly is the****behavior****that is not meeting my expectations?* Not responding to e-mails is clearly an observable behavior. You can see when an e-mail was sent and when and how it was responded to. You can compare the e-mail time and date to your expected response. In addition, there may be an organizational policy or expectation that defines how quickly e-mails are to be responded to.
2. *How does the behavior****affect****the work environment, the organizational culture, others' work performance, or the employee's ability to meet job expectations?* When an employee does not return e-mails or phone calls promptly, depending on the job, it can have a significant impact on the work environment because unanswered e-mails usually mean someone's request or question has not been addressed. Responsiveness is an indicator of professionalism and customer service. Unreturned or delayed responsiveness can mean lost or disappointed customers. It can also mean that others are not able to move ahead with their work.
3. *What behavior do I****expect****to see instead?* The behavior you expect is a response within a certain time frame, which may reflect an organizational expectation. For example, the expectation might be that all e-mails are returned within 24 hours of receipt.

Not responding to e-mails or phone calls in the expected time frame is clearly a job-related, observable behavior. It's not a pet peeve. It requires a painless performance conversation.

*Manager complaint*: "My gripe is people who are just too chatty. I encourage a positive work environment, but telling an employee that we have heard enough about her child's accomplishments is difficult."

Begin with the three questions in the Pet Peeve Formula:

1. *What exactly is the****behavior****that is not meeting my expectations?* When the conversation is not work related, it can take valuable time away from the day. Identify what is not getting done or how customers are affected by the employee's lack of focus. The behavior itself may not be the problem; however, if work suffers because of the behavior, it is worth addressing.
2. *How does the behavior****affect****the work environment, the organizational culture, others' work performance, or the employee's ability to meet job expectations?* If an employee is unfocused and spending time talking about non-work-related issues, it may mean that critical work is not getting done. What is not getting done? What is not getting the attention it deserves? If the chatty employee is getting his or her work done, how are others affected by the employee's behaviors?
3. *What behavior do I****expect****to see instead?* Rather than telling the employee that he or she should stop talking, focus on what you expect the employee to do instead. It could be that you expect a higher level of production, a faster response rate, or higher levels of productivity from the entire team.

The chatty employee can have a positive impact on the work environment—boosting morale and building team spirit. If this is the case, addressing the employee's behaviors and expecting a change may not be productive. However, when the employee's enthusiasm impedes his or her own or other's ability to focus on the job at hand, it's worth a conversation.

*Manager complaint:* "The employee chews gum too loudly."

Begin with the three questions in the Pet Peeve Formula:

1. *What exactly is the* ***behavior*** *that is not meeting my expectations?* The employee is chewing gum loudly.
2. *How does the behavior* ***affect*** *the work environment, the organizational culture, others' work performance, or the employee's ability to meet job expectations?* The answer to this question depends on the nature of the work and whether others have complained about the employee's gum chewing. If the employee does not interface directly with customers and others have not complained about the gum chewing, the gum chewing is not affecting the work environment. If that's the case, it is your own pet peeve.
3. *What behavior do I* ***expect*** *to see?* When the issue does not affect the work environment and you've determined that it is a pet peeve, a conversation is not required.

Chewing gum in many workplaces is considered unprofessional behavior. However, your job as a manager is to assess the impact of the gum chewing on the environment before addressing it as a performance issue. If there is no effect on workplace, this may be an issue better left alone.

**Let's Apply It**

***Describe the last time an employee did not perform up to your expectations. Apply the Pet Peeve Formula to your situation to determine whether the issue was a pet peeve or a legitimate concern by asking yourself:***

* What exactly is the **behavior** that did not meet my expectations?
* How does the behavior **affect** the work environment, the organizational culture, others' work performance, or the employee's ability to meet job expectations?
* What behavior did I **expect** to see instead?