

VIEW FROM THE CUBE | EILEEN MCAVOY BOYLEN

# Deciphering the performance review puzzle

In one of my more baffling performance reviews, my boss wrote "Eileen needs to better organize her office so co-workers can find things."

To be clear, my "office" was really a windowless cube about the size of a cocker spaniel crate. I occupied this tiny cube for eight hours each day during which time Kate Moss couldn't shimmy in to borrow a stapler. My possessions were few, and had anyone needed stale gummy bears or vending machine change I would have happily shared them.

So what did this mean? I didn't know that performance reviews contained puzzles more complex than the DaVinci Code. And, it took years for me to decipher them.

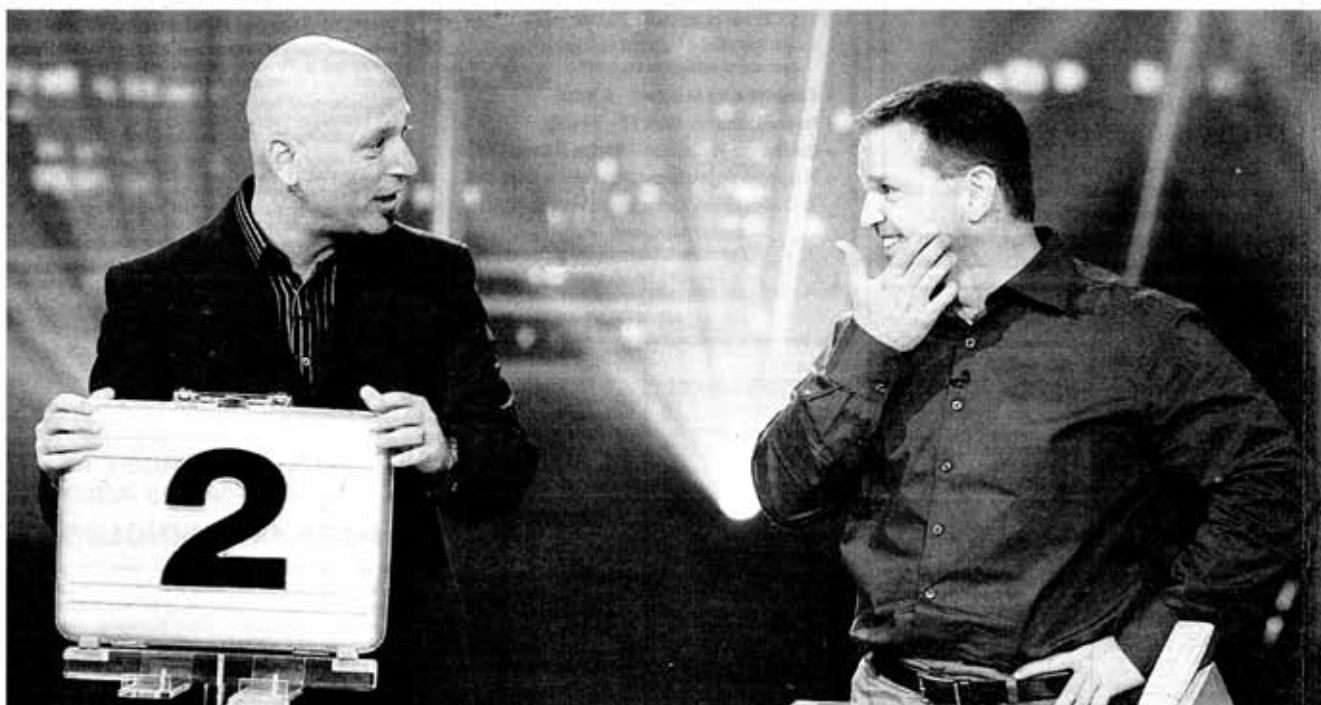
Done well, performance reviews are a great opportunity for open dialog and personal growth. Done poorly, they are an annual opportunity to say you stink and enumerate specific reasons why. To misquote Shakespeare, "How do I hate thee? Let me count the ways."

In my first secretarial performance review, there were four categories: "Attendance," "Attitude," "Citizenship," and "Alertness." Lots of room for differentiation there! Fortunately the options were numerical ratings not requiring commentary. I imagined words like "Eileen's alertness is the envy of secretaries company-wide," or "Her citizenship is just awe-inspiring." "Citizenship" didn't mean legal residency back then but I'm still not sure what it did mean.

Over the years, I've both given and received performance reviews. And, like most people, I remember the criticism more than the praise.

One of the more daunting formats is the "360 review." That's the one where the feedback is so constructive, helpful and well-meaning that it can only be provided anonymously. Co-workers, other managers, and subordinates get to secretly evaluate you using words they would never say to your face. "360" is probably a good descriptor because the circuitous commentary can make your head spin.

Then there's the "shock and awe" review, a favorite of passive-aggressive bosses everywhere. That's when your boss mentions, for the first time, things you did a year ago. I had one boss whose office was in a different building. Up until the review I thought he was just ignoring me. But at review time, he had plenty to say. It was like I was on "American Idol," and he couldn't share the results until America voted. And he was as shocked as I was at the outcome.



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It's said that over 90 percent of people's comments are projection. The "trickle down" review is a perfect example. That's where the boss gets a poor review, and she shares by cutting and pasting it into yours. One year my co-workers and I were so mystified by her comments that we compared notes.

I'm no statistician but I'm betting the odds are long that all eight of us needed "more fire in the belly" and "passion for the business." I'm also betting long odds that anyone uses those terms outside the motivation section at Borders.

To create more objectivity in evaluations, some sage invented management by objectives, or MBOs. Everyone gets specific goals they are measured against at year end. I've always found objectives to be sort of a spare time activity — something you pursue when you aren't fulfilling your actual job description. Let's say your job is to create coupons for the Sunday newspapers. Your objective might be a PowerPoint presentation extolling the virtues of your management.

At year-end, you are asked to report

your own performance. Anyone with a brain bigger than a tube sock says they accomplished every objective, or that they were "pushed off" to the next quarter for extreme business reasons. The results are quite predictable. But this can be an opportunity to showcase incredible creativity.

One former boss used to change my objectives as soon as I completed them. I felt like a greyhound chasing the rabbit around the track because as soon as I got close, the target would move again.

He did the same thing with sales quotas. Choosing objectives was as strategic as choosing a suitcase on "Deal or No Deal" because the final content was anyone's guess.

At one former employer, managers were not allowed to discuss salary increases at the same time as performance. As if the two were totally unrelated. "Well, Eileen, you had a lackluster year, but, the company did so well we've decided to give you 10 percent." Right.

Another bewildering element is the rating scale. We're told everyone should aspire to be average. In high school, this was called a "C" and I don't recall my parents

exchanging high fives over this particular achievement.

Today, most companies won't provide employee tuition reimbursement for a C, or average grade. Yet, come review time, management seems stunned by your disappointment and reads the annual "average is good" speech like Miranda rights from a 3-by-5 card.

Over the years, I've deciphered some of the hidden meanings in review-speak. For example, when someone says you have an "engaging sense of humor," it means no one takes you seriously. "Lacking a sense of urgency" means you are so slow you barely make it to the restroom in time. "Thinks strategically" means "knows when to suck up." And, "people skills need work" roughly translates "you should consider working with animals because people don't like you."

To be fair, I've had many valuable reviews. Numerous bosses invested the time to provide regular, fair, and thorough feedback about my strengths AND opportunities. Unfortunately, not all were this helpful.

The review suggesting I clean my office for my co-workers really meant I should clean it for my boss because it bugged him. These days I work alone. And, it's a good thing because co-workers couldn't find a blessed thing in here.