

The Workplace: Bad review? Speak up, carefully

By Matt Villano

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During your annual performance review, your boss gives you bad marks. You feel that the evaluation was unfair, but you are afraid of being branded a complainer. How do you speak your piece without sounding like a sore loser?

The last thing you want to do after receiving a bad review is keep quiet, said Dennis Garritan, an associate professor of human resources management at New York University. "If you think your review is unfair, there's no point suffering it in silence," Garritan said. "You don't want a negative review in your file, and the only way to do something about it is to speak up."

What is the most appropriate way to respond?

Before you do anything, take a deep breath. Nobody likes being criticized, and it is important to keep composure when responding. "Especially when you're delving into sensitive subjects, you want to be at your best," Garritan said. "If you are so worked up that you don't feel you can talk then and there, excuse yourself and schedule a second meeting for another time."

When you are ready to talk, start by asking your boss to repeat the criticisms one by one, to make sure you understand them. It is also wise to request specific examples of how and where the boss feels that you came up short, Garritan said. If you were docked for tardiness, for example, ask for the dates on which you were late. If your leadership skills are criticized, ask about the reason for this judgment.

How do you show that you have been misjudged?

Disputing hard facts is difficult. Joanne Cini, author of "Kingmaker: Be the One Your Company Wants to Keep ... on Your Terms," says the best way to rebut a negative performance appraisal is to be prepared with a one-page summary listing your contributions since the previous review. The summary should demonstrate how you have helped the company achieve its goals. Cini says that it also is a good place to share positive comments you have received from colleagues.

If you're invited to respond in writing, should you do so?

Even if you are not invited to respond, you should. A written response captures your arguments and preserves them for anyone who may read the review down the line. "You need a written record of your dissent," said Bill O'Brien, a partner at Miller-O'Brien, an employment

law firm in Minneapolis. "Without it, if the situation advances to the point of litigation, you've essentially got no ground to stand on."

Initially, share a written rebuttal only with your boss. If your boss dismisses the concerns, O'Brien said, it may be time to forward a copy to the human resources department or to explore your company's grievance mechanisms.

Either way, be careful what you write. Carole Martin, a former human resources manager at a biotechnology company, recalled a scientist who responded to a negative review with a six-page manifesto lambasting his boss, his boss's boss and a number of high-level executives in the organization. Martin, now president of the Interview Coach, a counseling firm in San Francisco, said the scientist's response outlined a number of demands, including requests for follow-up meetings, apologies and a raise. "This letter became a company joke," she said. "It alienated so many executives that they refused to hear him out at all."

Six months after the initial review, she said, the scientist resigned.

Would a boss ever reverse a negative review?

A well-written response may persuade your boss to reconsider or ameliorate a harsh judgment in a review.

Cini, who worked in executive-level sales and marketing positions at the ABC, NBC and Fox television networks, changed a handful of reviews after employees presented her with proof of their positive contributions to her team. In these cases, Cini included employee rebuttals in her reassessments and sometimes reversed her conclusions, but she also restated her misgivings, so that employees would still be aware of how she perceived their actions. This way, she said, "People would still think about the conversation."

What types of performance criticisms are worth disputing?

Constructive criticism is one thing. An unfounded attack is quite another, Cini said. "If you are an overachiever who disputes every average grade, your boss understandably might grow tired of the constant struggle," she said.

If your manager is paying attention, every performance review should highlight both strengths and weaknesses. After all, nobody is perfect. It's up to you to pick your battles.