



## The Secret to a Successful Performance Review

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As I recently sat across from one of my coaching clients, she said with exasperation:

*“My work should speak for itself! Why does my boss care so much about how I show up in meetings? Why does it matter how the slides look in my presentation? Why does any of that stuff matter?”*

After this smart, passionate, and young executive paused, I shared a powerful story and watched the light bulb in her mind turn on.

## A VALUABLE LESSON

The story is of a professor who came into her college class with a beautiful chocolate cake. The cake looked flawless with smooth, rich icing covering every inch. It had immaculately detailed decor all around the base and the scent filled the room causing mouths to water. She set it in front of the class and let all of their eyes and stomachs fill with anticipation.

*“Anyone want a piece of cake?”* she asked. Immediately, hands went straight up and she identified a young man in the front as the lucky winner. She set a plate next to the cake and then did something shocking. The professor plunged her open hand right in the middle of that beautiful cake, grabbed a chunk, and threw it on the plate. She graciously then offered it to the student. Wide-eyed with disbelief, the student stared at the once pristine cake as the professor just smiled.

*“What’s wrong?”* she asked. *“There is no difference between this piece and the rest of the cake. Why won’t you eat it?”*

The point was clear. Despite it being the same cake, the presentation and crude handling turned it into something much less desirable.

## PRESENTATION IS KEY

It is critical to match the value of one's work with the value of how it is explained. No matter how brilliant your work is, no matter what results you have achieved, if it is not presented and described in a way that conveys that brilliance, then others will likely struggle to see the value.

This is especially true when one explains their performance on their annual review. It is not enough to expect that your work will speak for itself. You need to be deliberate on how to present yourself and what you have worked so hard on over the past year. Display your work in a way that leaves no doubt of the value your work has provided.

## YOUR ANNUAL REVIEW

Every organization does the review process differently, but it all comes down to presenting yourself through the lens of the expectations of upper management.

- What does your boss want to see on your review?
- What information is most helpful to mention and how do you say it?
- What questions does your boss have that she needs answers for when it comes to your performance?

## THE 4 SECRETS TO SUCCESS

Here are the four areas that you need to answer for your boss. I call them the four secrets of successful performance reviews. Provide information to help your boss answer these four questions, and you are setting you and your boss up for success!

I give credit to [Steve King](#) at the Wisconsin School of Business Madison, who graciously shared these with me.

### **1. What can I BRAG about?**

Picture your boss describing each of her people and why they are awesome.

**QUESTIONS TO ANSWER:** Does she know all of the great things you've done? Does she have the information and details to tell others about you and your contributions?

**ACTION:** Create a list of activities and results you've achieved. Identify those things that you are proud of and others should hear about. Don't diminish your contributions. Consider the value that you have added to your team, department, and to the organization. Gets specific. Your boss needs to know what amazing things you've accomplished. She needs to know what things she should brag about you.

## **2. What am I CONCERNED about?**

Your boss probably worries about aspects of you and your team. She most likely has concerns or cautions due to what she has seen in the past or what she may know about in the future.

**QUESTIONS TO ANSWER:** What are the concerns she may have about your performance and your ability to reach the business and people results that are expected of you? Some of these things may be outside of your control, but it is important to be honest and upfront.

**ACTION:** Identify what those concerns might be. Regardless if you agree with them or feel they are unfounded, acknowledge them and help minimize the issues. Show how you are aware and understand her concerns. Describe how you have been and will continue to address them.

## **3. What do I WONDER about?**

Your boss will likely be curious about you, your interests, and your ambitions. Identify and communicate what you would like to do in the future.

**QUESTIONS TO ANSWER:** What are your career goals? What are the new or ongoing challenges you'd like to tackle? Does your boss know what these are?

**ACTION:** Describe the areas you wish to further develop. This can also go beyond you and include what would help your team grow and learn. Identify those experiences to help you be a better leader so your boss can know how to best support your future development.

#### **4. What would I BET on?**

Your boss will be thinking about what she can expect from you in the future. She will want to know what results and behaviors she can count on. We all grow and evolve. We all deal with competing priorities and none of us can predict the future.

**QUESTIONS TO ANSWER:** However, what could she bet on for the next year? What can you commit to in the future? What kind of changes, either personally or with your team, will happen in the coming year?

**ACTION:** To the best of your ability, identify what your boss can expect from you in the months to come.

# SUMMARY

Addressing these four secrets of successful performance reviews will help you shine. They answer the too often unmentioned questions that your boss has and best highlights your contributions—past, present, and future.

Remember, it is not just enough to casually mention some of your accomplishments, assuming your boss will get it and that your work will speak for itself. That would be like serving a beautiful cake with your bare hands!

Instead, serve and describe your contributions in a way that matches the level of value you add to your team and to the organization. Respond to these four secrets and see the difference, and let us know how it goes!