

# Preparing for Performance Reviews as a First- Time Manager

Being a first-time manager can be tough. Once the immediate thrill of the promotion has worn off, many new managers find themselves feeling daunted and overwhelmed. Shanna Hocking, the Associate Vice President at the [Children's Hospital of Philadelphia](#), remembers spending her [first weeks as a manager](#) “feeling burnt out, alone, and forgetting to bring my team along with me.”

Research by Gallup suggests managers' jobs may be getting harder. Their [2021 survey of manager burnout](#) found that people managers were 15% more likely to report being stressed than individual contributors.

If you're already feeling swamped, then performance reviews can seem like a bridge too far. For starters, there's the time involved. Adobe calculated that their managers (who had an average of five employees each) were [spending up to 40 hours a year on performance reviews](#).

On top of the time commitment, many managers find performance appraisal conversations awkward. A survey by Interact Studio found that more than [two-thirds of managers are uncomfortable with communication in general](#), and especially with giving feedback.

This workbook is designed to support new managers as you navigate the process of conducting performance reviews for the first time. We'll walk you through the three stages of effective performance evaluations:

- Preparing for the review
- Conducting the review
- Following the review

By making your way through this workbook, you'll start your first cycle of performance appraisals feeling calm, well-prepared, and ready to give your team [clear and comprehensive feedback](#).

Let's get started!

# Part 1: Preparing for the Review

Performance reviews get a bad rap. According to Gallup, [only 14% of employees think appraisals inspire better performance](#). In fact, a [2021 research paper suggests they can actually make employee performance worse](#).

However, done well, performance reviews can be beneficial for managers and employees alike. They also provide HR teams with essential data, boost morale, and can even reduce organizational bias, according to [research published in Harvard Business Review](#).

The key to great performance reviews is to prepare well in advance. Here's how:

## 1. Sort out the basics first.

If you've never had direct reports before, it's a good idea to check in with peer managers on your team, your manager, and your HR business partner to get advice and a sense of what to expect based on your [company culture](#).

### Exercise 1: Get organized.

Gather the information you need to fill in the following table:

How often do performance reviews happen?	
When do they take place?	
What questions will I be expected to answer about my direct reports?	
How do I present my performance reviews to management?	
What will I be reviewed on as a manager?	
Who will have access to my reviews?	
How are performance reviews discussed with direct reports?	
Are there existing templates or writing guides I should use?	

## 2. Get into the right mindset.

It's easy to look at reviews as extra work for managers. But the time you spend shaping and encouraging your direct reports will help them grow professionally and personally, directly improving overall team performance.

The [benefits of performance reviews](#) include:

- Creating a consistent, well-structured evaluation process
- Generating valuable data on employee performance
- Identifying top performers and employees in need of support
- Providing employees with feedback and progress markers
- Encouraging alignment between managers and direct reports
- Combating unconscious bias through standardized evaluations
- Collecting and integrating feedback from multiple sources

Great managers take reviews seriously, and use them to support their employees' growth. To remind yourself of why this is time well spent, consider the following questions:

Think back to when you were an individual contributor. What did you gain from performance reviews?

Did a former manager help you get to where you are now? What did you learn from their managerial style during performance reviews? What do you want to avoid doing?

What do you want your direct report(s) to gain from these reviews?

### 3. Start prepping 3 to 6 months before performance reviews.

Spending the whole year preparing for reviews can help the actual event seem less daunting, especially if you gather the information you need along the way.

**You can use this checklist to prepare:**

Create a document for your direct report(s)' accomplishments.  
This can be a simple Google Doc or note in Evernote, or you can use performance management software to keep your notes in one place.

During each weekly update and 1:1, add notes to your document.

Copy-paste any public feedback from peers or customers into the document.

Remember to add a date to keep track of when the feedback occurred.

At the end of each week, briefly note any outstanding achievements or performance issues experienced by your direct report(s) during the previous week.

## Exercise 2: How well do you know your team?

Fill in the following table for each of your direct reports. Use your notes to help prompt your memory. Remember to include your evidence for each answer. That way, you'll make sure you don't fall into the trap of [unconscious bias](#). Repeat this process for each direct report.

Name of Employee:			
Question	Evidence	Your Next Action	
What are their strengths?		How can you help them leverage their strengths at work?	
Where could they improve?		What learning resources and opportunities can you offer for them to demonstrate their growth?	
Communication	How will you communicate what you'd like to see them improve between now and their performance review?		
Support Plan	How will you help them address each area before the next performance review?		

## 4. Get organized 1 to 2 weeks before reviews.

Your first round of performance reviews are coming up fast. It's time to take a look at your notes in more detail.

### Exercise 3: Review your notes.

Use the following template to consider the performance for each direct report.

Name of Direct Report:	
Role:	
Look at the feedback and praise they've received from peers and external stakeholders. What patterns do you notice?	
What are their strengths (including evidence)?	
What are their areas of improvement (including evidence)?	
How much improvement have they made since your last conversations about growth?	
How have they met or failed expectations since your last review?	
Has anything surprised you about their performance?	
What new goals would you like them to achieve during the next cycle?	

Performance evaluations should never come as a surprise to employees. Use the following checklist to make sure that both you and your direct reports are fully prepared.

**Checklist:**

Are your direct reports preparing a self-report? If so, have you provided them with resources? Here's a [self-evaluation template](#) that they can use alongside our [tips and examples of self-reviews](#).

Is peer feedback part of this round of reviews? If so, have you checked in to make sure they've requested reviews? Try this [peer review template](#).

Is your HR team offering performance review training for employees? If so, have you encouraged or required your employees to attend?

Have you checked in to see if your employees have questions about the performance review process or the training they received (if applicable)?

Have you scheduled a performance review meeting with each direct report?



# Part 2: During the Review Process

In this section, we'll get into the details of how to write your reviews, and how to share your feedback with your direct reports.

## 1. Write the performance review.

While you should formally complete the review in [Lattice Performance Management](#) or your company's review platform of choice, this section will take you through a practice version of the review so you can be prepared for each of your direct reports.

If you want your performance reviews to be helpful, you need to write them well. But don't worry — you don't need to be Shakespeare. This isn't about perfect grammar or a huge vocabulary. To make your comments useful, you need to make sure that you:

- Provide specific examples to back up your claims
- Avoid making sweeping generalizations
- Stay mindful of unconscious bias
- Connect your direct reports' actions to outcomes

Instead of....	Try writing...
Good listener	Listens effectively by taking notes during meetings and asking questions when needed.
Never on time to meetings	Has been late to the previous four project meetings with coworkers.
A good team player	Contributes to a positive team culture by offering suggestions and sharing feedback.

#### Exercise 4: Brush up your writing skills.

Now it's your turn.

1. Read this article: [How to Write More Effective Performance Review Comments](#).
2. Choose one of your direct reports to use as an example.
3. With them in mind, answer each of the following questions:

To what extent did this person meet their performance goals?

How well does this person prioritize and manage their workload?

How well does this person communicate with others?

Go back through your answers. Ask yourself:

Was I specific?

Did I provide examples to back up my claims?

Did I avoid making generalizations?

Did I connect the employee's behavior to the outcomes?

Did I avoid making comments on their personality, instead of their performance?

## A Note on Unconscious Bias

Research suggests performance reviews are highly susceptible to rater bias. No matter how well intentioned the reviewer, it can be hard to [stamp out all unconscious biases from your performance appraisals](#). However, there are steps that you can take as a manager to help mitigate your own bias and give your team more equitable performance reviews.

### What to do:

#### 1. Complete DEIB training.

If your company offers DEIB training, then this is a great first place to start. If not, [Microsoft offers free and comprehensive online DEIB training](#).

#### 2. Familiarize yourself with common rater biases.

When it comes to performance reviews, some of the most frequent biases shown by managers include:

- Gender bias
- Racial bias
- Anchor bias (over-reliance on first impressions)
- Proximity bias (rating onsite employees more highly than remote workers)
- Recency bias (basing your ratings only on recent events)
- Halo bias (inflated positive ratings of skills based on your positive perception of an employee).

#### 3. Get to know yourself.

To quote [Marcus Buckingham](#), Head of People and Performance research at ADP Research Institute: “On average, 61% of my rating of you is a reflection of me.” Start by understanding where your own biases lie. The [Implicit Association Test](#) is a useful tool to get you started.

#### 4. Get some practice.

Go through your comments again. Consider any ways in which you have shown unconscious bias. Remember, you can be biased towards people as well as biased against them.

Want more guidance on diversity, equity, inclusivity and belonging? Check out our webinar: [Using Lattice to Bring your DEIB Strategy to Life](#)

## 2. Conduct a face-to-face review.

Once you've shared your performance reviews with your team, schedule time with them to discuss your comments. For many managers, this can be a nerve-wracking experience. Will your direct report be defensive or angry? Will they be overly emotional? Have you justified your comments effectively? How can you make this a positive experience?

Here are five steps to making your performance review conversations comfortable and helpful for both parties:

- **State your intentions upfront.**

Performance review meetings can be stressful for both parties. Instead of leaping right into discussing your feedback, take the time to explain to your employees what you're hoping the review will achieve. Remind the employee of the purpose of the exercise — to give them the feedback they need to achieve their full potential.

Executive coaches Peter Bregman and Howie Jacobson recommend [managers should position themselves as allies, not critics](#):

“No one wants to talk to a critic. Everyone wants to talk to an ally. When you're someone's ally, you display caring for them, confidence in them, and commitment to them. In your presence, they drop shame and defensiveness, and instead focus on becoming better.”

**Try saying:** “You've done a fantastic job over the past six months. I've tried to reflect that in my comments, and also suggest some areas where you could further improve. I'm hoping that this review will be useful for helping you to reach the next step in your career.”

- **Listen first.**

Instead of jumping in with your feedback right away, it can be helpful to initiate a two-way dialogue, and invite the employee to share their views first.

Have them talk through their self-review with you and explain their comments

Ask them if there is anything they'd like to focus on during the performance review

Find out how they felt while writing about their performance

Discuss their feelings about your comments, and if there were any points they were surprised by

Invite them to give you feedback on your performance as a manager, and flag up any ways in which you could better support them

- **Review key points of the performance review.**

Now that you've established the areas that are most of interest to your employee, it's time to discuss the review itself. Using your review and any additional notes, touch on key points about their accomplishments and opportunities for improvement. Make sure you cover:

Broad themes they should focus on, so they don't feel overwhelmed

Areas where they've excelled

Examples of how they've demonstrated company values

Moments when they surprised you

Great ideas that they suggested

Ways in which they've added value to the team

- **Focus on next steps.**

Highlighting solutions in place of focusing on problems is a sign of a strong, effective manager. Work with your employee to solidify action items for the next quarter (or next review cycle) and develop a performance plan. Include:

Specific, measurable objectives that outline what they need to accomplish

Guidelines on what the company expects from them

Professional development support needed to help them reach their goals

Your employee should have a good understanding of what's going well, what can be improved, and what they need to do to reach their career goals, team goals and performance goals.

- **Schedule a follow-up.**

Before finishing your meeting, let your employee know when you'll be meeting to follow up on the performance objectives you've laid out together. That way, they know that this is part of an ongoing conversation, not a checkbox exercise.

Feel like you need more guidance on how to handle performance review conversations? We got you. Check out our free webinar recording, [Mastering the Performance Review Conversation](#). You'll learn how to structure the performance review conversation, approach defensive responses to negative feedback, and construct your own personal narrative in a review setting.

## Part 3: After the Review

You have your first round of performance reviews under your belt — congratulations! To get the most out of the experience, it's worth spending some time evaluating how it went.

### Exercise 5: Make time for reflection.

Answer the following questions:

1. How well prepared were you for your performance reviews? Is your current method of tracking employee performance working well for you, or do you need to update it?

2. Did your employees find your performance comments helpful? Was there anything you could have expressed better? Were there any particular phrases that seemed to resonate really well with your direct reports?

3. How did you feel about the conversations? Were there any points at which either of you felt uncomfortable? What could have gone better? Did you leave anything unsaid? If so, why?

4. How can you best support your team during the next performance cycle? What needs do they have that you can't support alone? Who will you ask for help?

To wrap up, make sure that you've tied up all the final tasks of the performance review cycle.

**Checklist:**

Ensure both parties have access to the performance plan.

Update any goals in Lattice Grow (or your performance management software of choice) to acknowledge accomplishments or objectives for the next cycle.

Schedule a follow-up meeting to discuss progress towards the objectives, or add these points to your agenda for your next employee one-on-ones.

Contact HR about any additional employee training needs that emerged during the performance review process.



# Performance reviews are key to a continuous feedback culture.

When you're new to managing direct reports, performance appraisals may feel like a daunting process with a lot of additional steps. But they are also a great opportunity to help your team learn and grow.

Reviews create a moment in your busy schedule when you can focus exclusively on your direct report's strengths and areas of opportunity. They put you and your team on the same side, working together to deliver the best possible performance. Used well, they can be a powerful tool in your management toolbox, helping you become one of those managers that employees remember for years to come.

For more support with performance reviews, check out our additional reading from the Resources for Humans library:

## Articles

[5 Phrases You Should Never Use in Performance Reviews](#)

[6 Tips for Successful Remote Performance Reviews](#)

[How Your Brain Responds to Performance Reviews](#)

[Performance Reviews vs. Continuous Feedback](#)

[Questions to Ask During Mid-Year Performance Reviews](#)

[Step-by-Step Guide for Conducting Successful Mid-Year Performance Reviews](#)

## Ebooks

[How to Use Performance Management to Inspire Employee Growth](#)

[Performance Review Playbook](#)

## Templates:

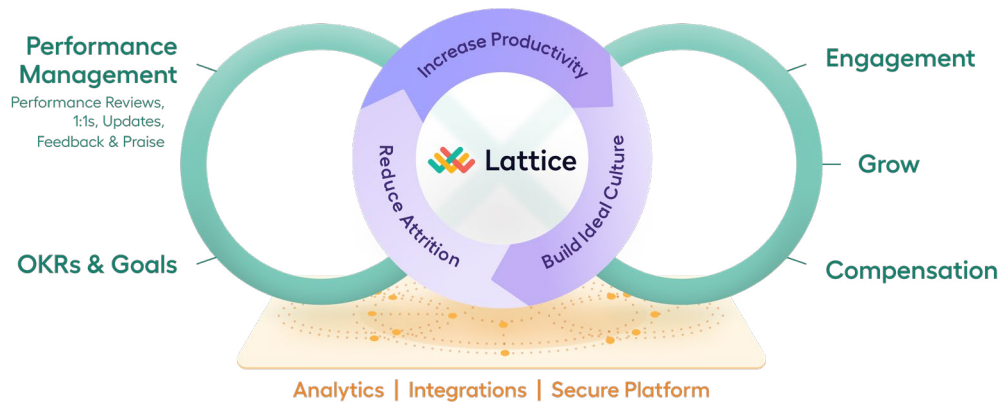
[Annual Performance Review Conversation Template](#)

[Performance Review Question Bank](#)

[Quarterly Performance Review Template](#)

# About Lattice

Lattice is the people success platform that enables HR leaders to develop engaged, high-performing teams. By combining continuous performance management, employee engagement, development, compensation, and growth in one solution, organizations get powerful, real-time analytics that leads to actionable insights turning managers into leaders, employees into high performers, and companies into the best places to work.



## The Lattice People Success Platform

Lattice works with companies that aspire to put people first. Whether redefining the beauty industry or building self-driving cars, all of our customers have one thing in common: They value their employees and want to invest in the development and success of their people. To see Lattice's platform in action, [schedule a product tour](#).

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