

Shifting the conversation so performance reviews aren't 'done' to employees - Canadian HR Reporter

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the cultural and operational challenges of performance management in Canadian organizations, drawing on a virtual roundtable featuring HR leaders from the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and Gowling WLG. The central argument advanced by both practitioners is that effective performance management requires reframing reviews as employee-serving tools rather than processes imposed upon staff, and that a shift from annual to continuous feedback cycles is necessary to reduce the outsized weight of year-end reviews. Key evidence is drawn from organizational practice: TIFF introduced quarterly reviews and mid-year check-ins approximately four years ago, while Gowling WLG began a performance cycle refresh in the prior year. Both organizations highlight time and skill as the primary barriers to effective implementation. Additional findings address ratings inflation (described as a 'halo effect'), the emotional complexity of linking compensation to performance ratings, the undervaluation of employees who consistently meet expectations, the role of calibration sessions in reducing bias, and the early-stage exploration of AI tools to support feedback quality and data synthesis. The implications drawn are that organizations benefit from upstream investment in goal quality, manager skill-building, and systemic integration of performance conversations into regular workflows.

Key Insights

1. Ratings distributions skewing too positive may signal organizational misalignment on performance expectations rather than genuine high performance, according to Gowling WLG's senior director of people and culture.
2. Employees who consistently meet — rather than exceed — expectations are described as underrecognized despite providing the organizational stability needed to sustain strategy execution.
3. Both practitioners identify time and skill, not process design, as the primary obstacles to effective performance management, particularly in environments where managers are client-focused rather than people-focused.

Practical Takeaways

- TIFF's practice of pre-calibration working groups — where managers discuss observed patterns in a lower-stakes setting before entering formal calibration sessions — is presented as a mechanism for reducing bias in performance ratings.
- Gowling WLG's approach of monitoring the gap between self-ratings and leader ratings is described as a diagnostic tool for identifying misaligned expectations or inflated assessments at the organizational level.

Frameworks Mentioned

360-Degree Review — TIFF is planning to introduce 360-degree feedback specifically for managers as the next phase of their performance management evolution.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article presents candid, experience-grounded observations from HR practitioners at named organizations, lending contextual credibility. The discussion of ratings inflation, pay-performance decoupling challenges, and the neglect of 'consistently meets' employees reflects genuine complexity rather than idealized best-practice framing. **Limitations:** The article is entirely anecdotal; no empirical data, sample sizes, or outcome metrics are provided to validate the claims made. The roundtable format introduces selection bias, as participants are self-selected advocates for continuous feedback approaches. The AI discussion is speculative and early-stage, with no implemented outcomes reported. **Biases:** The framing consistently favors continuous feedback models over annual review structures without presenting counterarguments or evidence of cases where annual reviews have performed adequately. The article originates from a media outlet (Canadian HR Reporter) whose audience is HR professionals, which may influence the framing toward practitioner-friendly narratives.

Organizational Practice

TIFF introduced quarterly performance reviews and a mid-year check-in approximately four years ago, integrating structured prompts into regular one-on-ones and conducting pre-calibration manager working groups to surface bias before formal sessions. Gowling WLG began a performance cycle refresh in the prior year aimed at making year-end reviews non-surprising through more proactive, collaborative check-ins. Both organizations are exploring AI tools — TIFF for scenario-based planning and outlier detection; Gowling WLG for tone enhancement and feedback formulation in written reviews.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader practitioner trend toward decoupling compensation decisions from performance ratings and toward treating goal quality and manager skill as upstream determinants of system effectiveness. The emerging use of AI for feedback synthesis and ratings pattern analysis — still in exploratory phases at both organizations — points toward increasing organizational interest in data-driven identification of calibration anomalies. The emphasis on recognizing 'consistently meets' employees as a distinct and valuable cohort suggests a potential reorientation of recognition programs away from top-performer exclusivity.

Validation Status: passed
