

4 ways leaders can stop dreading performance reviews - SmartBrief

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the widespread distrust and ineffectiveness of annual performance reviews in organizational settings. The author argues that the fundamental flaw is structural — attempting to consolidate evaluation, development, and compensation into a single high-stakes annual event — rather than a problem of tools or budget. Drawing on a personal anecdote, a Deloitte study reporting that 61% of managers and 72% of employees distrust their organization's performance management systems, Adobe's 'Check-in' model, and Betterworks' 2024 State of Performance Enablement report, the author contends that shifting to a continuous feedback cadence dramatically improves employee engagement, trust, and retention. Four practical actions are proposed: establishing biweekly check-ins, maintaining ongoing documentation, separating compensation from development conversations, and ensuring the formal review functions as a summary rather than a revelation. The article concludes that the formal annual review retains value only when supported by a year-round feedback culture, and that consistent managerial presence is the primary driver of employee retention.

Key Insights

1. A Deloitte study cited in the article reports that 61% of managers and 72% of employees do not completely trust their organization's performance management systems, suggesting systemic legitimacy deficits rather than isolated dissatisfaction.
2. Adobe's shift from annual reviews to its ongoing 'Check-in' process is attributed to a 30% increase in employee engagement, illustrating that feedback cadence changes — independent of content changes — can produce measurable outcomes.
3. Betterworks' 2024 State of Performance Enablement report is cited as finding that employees who receive ongoing feedback are three times more likely to feel capable in their roles and more likely to perceive a career development path within their organization.

Practical Takeaways

- Biweekly informal check-ins structured around three questions — what is going well, what is getting in the way, and what is needed from the manager — are presented as a low-cost mechanism for building continuous feedback infrastructure.
- Decoupling compensation discussions from development conversations is described as a way to reduce cognitive distraction during feedback exchanges, allowing more substantive engagement with growth-oriented content.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The article synthesizes recognizable organizational pain points with accessible, actionable guidance. The Adobe case and the Deloitte and Betterworks statistics lend some empirical grounding. The four-step framework is coherent and internally consistent. **Limitations:** The article is primarily opinion and practitioner commentary rather than research. The Deloitte statistic and Betterworks report are cited without methodology details, making independent verification difficult. The Adobe 30% engagement figure lacks source citation, timeframe, or control conditions. The author does not acknowledge implementation barriers such as manager capacity, organizational culture resistance, or sector-specific constraints. The claim that decoupling compensation from development conversations leads to more honest engagement is asserted without cited evidence. **Biases:** The article reflects a strong pro-continuous-feedback stance consistent with current HR technology industry narratives, and the SmartBrief platform context suggests a practitioner audience predisposed to actionable leadership content rather than critical evaluation.

Organizational Practice

Adobe's 'Check-in' process is described as a shift away from traditional annual reviews toward an ongoing, less structured, two-way conversation between employees and managers focused on career growth. The article also describes practitioner-level practices including biweekly informal check-ins, real-time documentation of employee contributions, and the separation of compensation and development discussions into distinct conversations.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader trend in performance management toward continuous, lower-stakes feedback loops as an alternative to high-frequency, high-consequence annual events. The emphasis on manager consistency and psychological safety in feedback exchanges aligns with documented shifts in PMS design away from rating-centric models. The decoupling of compensation and development conversations represents an emerging structural consideration in PMS architecture. If the trust deficit figures cited are directionally accurate, they point to a legitimacy crisis in conventional PMS that cadence changes alone may not fully resolve.

Validation Status: passed
