

# Human(itarian) Performance Evaluation During a Humanitarian Crisis

THOUGHT PAPER

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COVID-19 is not our first crisis, nor do I imagine it will be our last. Though we can draw upon lessons from past crisis - like the financial meltdown of 2008 or the swine flu outbreak (H1N1) in 2009, the economic and social impact of coronavirus is unparalleled. Its effects on the workforce have manifested itself on multiple fronts - financial, physical, and psychological, making it first and foremost a humanitarian crisis.

In such a scenario, are the old legacy metrics apt measures of employee productivity? Is it fair to assess employees using parameters designed for a work environment radically different from a digital world's realities?

With many organizations still unsure about how to manage their performance review, we are of the view that a humanitarian crisis calls for a humanitarian approach, one which is transparent, flexible, and unbiased. Here are some strategies organizations can use to evaluate employees wrestling with an existential crisis:

### Reassess

- Re-think the purpose: Traditionally, the main aim of performance reviews is to weigh productivity and decide pay hikes, promotions, and bonuses. But with the pandemic overstaying its welcome, organizations need to re-think the purpose of their performance review. **Is it the right time to segregate poor performers or decide who gets a raise?** After all, impacted by the pandemic, many employees would have failed to meet their targets, and evaluating them against goals set last year equates to setting them up to fail. Definitely a fatal blow to employee morale.
- A catalyst to strengthen culture: **Performance reviews in such times can be an enabler to strengthen company culture.** It can be used as an opportunity to establish a culture of transparency and collaboration.
- Enable level playing field: **Reviews can be used as an avenue to shift goals and tasks as per unique employee requirements,** creating a level playing field and giving employees an equal chance at productivity.

### Recalibrate

Quantitative versus qualitative metrics: With a shift in goalposts, is the application of quantitative metrics to measure employee achievements against pre-pandemic objectives valid? **With unprecedented disruptions to their professional and personal lives, employees unable to meet their targets are shining in other areas.** Overcoming their challenges, they are

offering creative solutions to maintain business operations. Where on the one hand they may have suffered a decline in productivity, on the other, they have excelled at collaboration and teamwork. Soft skills like resilience and empathy exhibited by employees are qualitative elements that need to be acknowledged and rewarded as well during evaluations.

### Rephrase

- Have a compassionate conversation: The effect of issues like lack of proper workspace, sharing gadgets with children studying from home, and the responsibility of sick family members need to be factored in during evaluations. **Instead of a formal review, the current context calls for a compassionate conversation that acknowledges hardships and does not look at employee deliverables alone.** Instead of chastising non-performers, you need to ask and find out what is going on in their lives and provide apt resources and counseling to those who are overwhelmed.
- Show flexibility and leniency: **Give faltering employees a grace period** to come up to speed instead of giving warnings and demanding improvement like you would under normal conditions. In that spirit, companies can even consider being more **forgiving in terms of their ratings (or do away with them altogether),** giving people the latitude they need to adjust to a new reality.

### Replace

- Motivate through regular check-ins: Traditionally, performance reviews are treated as huge annual/semi-annual events to measure efficiency and competitiveness. However, now you are dealing with a set of people feeling an acute sense of detachment from 'office' and there are studies to prove that employees who work remotely are less motivated. In this environment, organizations can replace annual reviews with more regular check-ins as a tool to engage employees and to give them a sense of belonging.
- Give continuous feedback: An evaluation culture consisting of more frequent and smaller evaluations will allow managers to provide feedback in real-time while giving employees the impetus they need to adjust to shifting expectations. This is the time to celebrate achievements and show employees that their contributions are being recognized equitably. **Assurances of success, even in such trying times, will motivate employees to consistently replicate high performing behavior.**

- Give feedback that matters: Already overwhelmed by the ambiguity surrounding them, **organizations can use performance evaluations as an opportunity to bring in some semblance of normalcy to their lives with feedback that is transparent, concrete, actionable, and most importantly, unbiased.** As you touch base often with your employees to discuss areas of improvement, **stay clear of vague sentences** like “We would like to see you improve”. Instead, be specific about the behavior you would like them to change - “We have noticed that you have been late for team meetings lately.” Taking the feedback process a step further, **collaborate with employees to identify remedial actions** with questions like “What problems are you facing?” or “How can we support you in meeting your timelines?”, or “Do you have adequate resources?”

### From here to where?

For successful performance management, there is an urgent need for an overhaul in the traditional system of performance evaluation (for instance judging people on the number of hours vis-a-vis output). However, until that change comes about, it falls upon organizations and leaders to find the balance between the welfare of their people and keeping their businesses afloat. While the impact of coronavirus is expected to play out even in the foreseeable future, like all other crises this too shall pass. Organizations with people-focused processes will keep their support in the future and reap benefits when the tide turns (which it eventually will). But this means taking a creative and human-centric approach towards evaluations.

### Regroup

Solicit feedback and perspectives: Important even in pre-COVID times, in the current environment, managers must solicit feedback and collect peer perspective during the performance review. Peers who work together in a team generally are more in the know about what each employee contributes and problems faced due to the pandemic. No longer at the liberty to physically observe employee effectiveness and efficiency, questions around working remotely should be included in the performance measurements for a fair assessment; **“How effectively has the employee been communicating?”** or **“How responsive has the employee been when needed?”** or **“How resilient has the employee been in adapting to remote work?”**

### A minor detour - do not use evaluations as a garb for bad news!

With their progress stalled, we acknowledge that companies are bleeding, and many are going under. Those who are able to sustain are having a hard time re-inventing themselves. Struggling to stay afloat, we know of instances where companies have resorted to desperate measures like laying people off under the pretense of poor performance. If there was ever a more callous approach to performance evaluation, this is it. With no playbook to follow, companies are designing their performance evaluation strategies based on their industry and business requirements, with some even foregoing the process. While we advise companies to continue with the process (as a way to be in touch with employees working virtually and to boost morale), **we strongly advise them against using poor ratings as a strategy to lay people off.** By doing so companies run the serious (and lasting) risk of employees doubting their abilities as well as damaging their own image (underhanded practices have a way of becoming a well-known secret).

## About the Author



**Mainak** brings over 24 years of experience spanning business and HR roles across geographies. This has given him a unique understanding of the link between HR and business strategy. He also holds a patent for HR capability development.

Mainak's experience includes human capital strategy, culture, talent development (performance, leadership development, career pathing, competency, learning, engagement, diversity) and talent acquisition (including on-boarding and background check). He has also implemented HRIS platform and HR metrics to improve performance.

Recently he has been helping start-ups set up efficient and effective HR teams and processes. In addition, Mainak is a recognized Executive Coach and Leadership Development expert.

Mainak's previous work experience includes stints/projects with Accenture (Consulting and HR), Hewitt Associates, AbsolutData, Heidrick & Struggles, Evalueserve, Sterlite Technologies and Upstox.

Mainak holds a MBA from the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, and is a certified executive coach.

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