



Performance Conversations: Treating top performers can be trickier than you think...

by Bill Cropper – The Change Forum

Based on materials and experiences drawn from our conversational coaching master class on Positive Performance Conversations © Bill Cropper 2011-17

Aliesha was really thriving in her new position. She was remarkably energetic, innovative and dedicated, and she'd been hand-picked for the role by her boss who had every faith in her ability to get the results he wanted. Six months after starting she was more-than-ready to resign. The job was what she expected. But the way her boss treated her in an off-hand, unappreciative fashion that always assumed she'd put in an immaculate performance every-time, no matter how challenging the task, was just too much.

She'd had no real challenging or growthful performance feedback since she'd arrived – except for platitudes and one-liners like *"I made a really good choice hiring you"*, *"that's awesome"* or *"great – well done"*. Aliesha really wanted to be challenged and grow from the work she was doing, not feel like she'd run out of new frontiers.



Gratitude and Platitudes

Sometimes in my [Positive Performance Conversations](#) clinics, I get the distinct impression many of us think performance conversations are really reserved for low or difficult performers having issues or deficiencies – and that for high performers, it's just a formality to mutter a few messages of vague and unspecific praise or encouragement and tick the *"excels-at-everything"* boxes.

Saying things to a high performer like *"you're doing great"*, *"there's really nothing much I can say about your performance because it's tops"* or *"brilliant, keep up the good work"*, are just as likely not to be taken in the motivating manner you mean, even if they elicit an initial smile or gesture of gratitude. Top performers need your recognition, encouragement and most of all, your considered feedback, too. They need to be supported and developed just like poor performers do...

Performance conversations can be as much about praising, recognising, coaching, encouraging and developing good performers – as it is about dealing with poor ones. Your top performers are keen to get even better.

General positive platitudes don't help them. Low performers may not want to know what their strengths and weaknesses are – but your good performers frequently definitely do. They need appreciation,

recognition, valuing and support just as much as the low performers you're trying to bring up to speed. They may feed off it, whereas a poor performer has become conditioned to a leaner diet. In fact, giving feedback to a top performer can be even tougher.



Top performers may not have obvious development needs you can see. You have to work harder to find them. Feedback you give to a top performer often has to be just (if not more) carefully framed than with low performers. It's essential to keep them engaged, focused and motivated and if you misjudge the mark, you may do the opposite.

Missing the Marks

There's often a tendency not to bring up a blindspot or lack with a top performer because overall their performance is excellent and you don't want to rock-the-boat. After all, you rely on them to keep getting results.

- Some high performers are surprised if you decide to explore not only how good they are but also how they can be even better. They may not be used to feedback like this and may get prickly at the imputation they're not perfect.
- Sometimes, you have to give top performers difficult feedback about a particular problem. For example, some top performers get results by letting other things slide, such as building good relationships, collaborating with others or treating people with due regard.
- Similarly, a high-performer's strength can also be a weakness. You have to look carefully behind the results and see the behaviours that enable them to succeed – and at what cost.

For instance, Warwick was in all ways as I recall, regarded as a top-performer in his division. Teams under his management delivered and he took a results-focused, no-nonsense approach to managing them. At the same time, five team leaders had left inside two years and exit interviews revealed that at least three cited Warwick as a reason for going. So don't be lulled into thinking a conversation with a top-performer doesn't ever need to tackle hard issues or involve difficult feedback. It can and you need to keep a keen eye out for areas where top performers can stretch or may even be under-performing.

Top Performers – DO's and DON'Ts

So how should I treat top-performers? Here's a few DO's and DON'Ts in dealing with top performers that we cover in our *Positive Performance Conversations* clinic...

- DO focus on the future and their next frontier – ask what do you want to achieve next? DON'T just focus on how good their current performance is or improving inside that.
- DO explore with them exactly, the elements that contribute to their success. DON'T assume they necessarily know the specific things that help them get good results.
- DO express gratitude for their contributions and praise current performance. DON'T make the mistake of assuming they already know how well they're doing or don't need sincere appreciation, thanks or recognition.
- DO start your conversation by stating specifically what they've accomplished. Be precise about exactly what and how they've done this and the results this helped to get. DON'T just give general praise platitudes and leave it at that. They have a right to know what aspects of their work or talents you value and which ones are getting results for them.
- DO take time to give frequent, specific feedback if you want to retain them. If they don't feel as if they're valued and they're developing, they'll leave. DON'T leave your high performers alone on the assumption they don't need your support, help or attention because they're doing fine.

- DO give considered, careful feedback, including growth and challenge areas or attending to weak spots. All praise isn't balanced feedback. DON'T be lulled into relaxing the rules of good feedback for top performers or be less strenuous or specific in giving it.
- DO challenge them to find ways to do better or develop new capabilities to fit them out for the future. Coach them to set stretch goals. DON'T assume they're perfect. There's room to improve always. You do them a disservice to not work on how to keep growing.
- DO always highlight a few areas to improve on or strengthen and/or ask them about things they think they could do to improve. DON'T assume they have reached the limit of their performance and tell yourself you don't have anything to explore further with them.
- DO tackle difficult issues with good performers. Sometimes these relate to how they treat others or what they sacrifice to get results. DON'T be lulled into glossing over difficult issues with good performers because overall they are good and you don't want to upset them.

Making it Meaningful

More and more we hear people say they want performance conversations to be meaningful – and that often includes dumping old-fashioned performance appraisal reviews that are so often so tedious to both parties.

Real performance development isn't measurement frameworks, recording mechanisms or box-ticking. So what's the replacement? Real performance improvement should rotate around the continual rounds of regular performance coaching conversations leaders have with people as a natural part of the way you want to lead and they want to improve.

Done well, it helps achieve goals, build skills and talent, aligns individual and organisational effort, keeps people on track and encourages performance and personal growth. For all the glitzy performance-review instrumentation and other corporate HR bling, nothing replaces a good relationship where people can sit down face-to-face and talk over what's going on.

And that's the coaching focus of *Positive Performance Conversations*. Whether you're dealing with performers who are difficult or diligent, the principles and tools we share in our clinic and self-coaching Guide can help you prepare for meaningful conversations about performance and handle them with more confidence, delivering even touchy or sensitive feedback in positive, encouraging ways.

Our Five Footings and Frameworks model offers you down-to-earth tools and conversational formulas that help you take an appreciative approach that minimises defensiveness and turns performance conversations into mutual problem-solving and coaching development sessions.

See our on-line [Course Calendar](#) at www.thechangeforum.com for dates our public clinics are coming up in your area. And if you've a group of 10 or more, we're happy to come to you. Use our on-line [Enquiry](#) form or call **Bill Cropper** direct to discuss arrangements for an in-house clinic at a venue of your choice.

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