Beating performance anxiety

That exciting time of year is fast approaching – the season for performance and remuneration reviews! With the impact of the GFC blunted but remaining a key consideration for most Australian law firms and organisations, it is more important than ever to prepare and present well at these appraisals.

Here are some key tips to successfully navigating the performance review process.¹

**PERFORMANCE REVIEWS**

**Before the review**

A good result is impossible without thorough preparation. Have a think about your long-term plan when preparing for your review. In the months leading up to your performance appraisal, you should regularly assess your performance against your role as set out in your job description and your performance targets. Are you meeting these in your day-to-day work? If the answer is “yes”, be confident about highlighting this during your review. If it’s “no”, now’s the time to instigate an action plan to address any shortcomings.

To ensure there are no nasty surprises at review time, you should be seeking regular feedback from your supervisor so you understand what is expected of you. This will allow you to address any issues with your performance before they hinder your career progression. It is often helpful to seek out a mentor outside of your organisation with whom you can discuss matters such as career progress, performance reviews and salary reviews.

Don’t forget that firms invest significant time and resources in their review process.² Demonstrate your understanding of its importance by completing the necessary forms on time and meeting the scheduled review dates. Have a look at the material provided by your firm, such as key competencies. Try to anticipate any questions or comments that may arise (positive or negative) and prepare appropriate responses.³

Finally, show that you really want that raise or promotion by preparing a written business case. This document should outline, in detail, the work you have done in the previous year and why this justifies a salary increase and growth of your role within the firm.

If you’ve formed good relationships with clients or have gone out on the marketing circuit – put it down. Highlight any increase in your level of responsibility, leadership roles, instances when you have gone “above and beyond” in the service of clients, profile-raising activities or involvement in industry associations or groups.

You should also discuss what you are going to achieve in the coming year, how you are going to achieve this and why this is important to the firm.⁴ Do not assume that your supervisors will know everything that you have done in the past year – have examples to hand that demonstrate what you have achieved.

**During the review**

During the appraisal, you must be able to articulate clearly and consistently how you have met your performance goals. Practise this beforehand and prepare for it like it’s a job interview, not just another meeting. Give examples of how you have improved as a result of various experiences or have learned from any mistakes.

If there are negative aspects to the review, try not to be defensive. Instead, acknowledge any problems and seek to develop constructive outcomes. If the review isn’t going well, focus on setting goals for the year ahead and use the review as an opportunity to communicate your goals to your supervisors.

This is a great opportunity to ask your reviewer for suggestions on how best to achieve your targets.
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After the Review
Take notes during the review so afterwards you can reflect on what was said. Give yourself time to process the feedback before deciding on a course of action. Then formulate an action plan to help you achieve the new performance goals and to develop or improve in particular areas.

REMUNERATION REVIEWS
Do your homework about your worth. Find out the going rate for lawyers with your level of experience in similar firms and don’t be coy about sharing this information during the review. Make sure that you’re comparing “apples with apples”. For example, know whether the figure includes bonus payments, or is total remuneration or base remuneration. However, beware of using ultimatums – they might work in movies but in real life they will only get you into strife. Also, be mindful of any confidentiality clauses in your employment contract when discussing remuneration with others.

As with performance appraisals, you should reflect on your contribution to the firm over the past year and how you will add value in the future before going into your remuneration review. Be able to explain what you have done in the past year that justifies (a) retaining you and (b) rewarding you. Communicate this clearly (but constructively) in the review. Make it sound like a very logical equation. You may want to think outside the square as remuneration is not just about salary. Consider the other benefits your firm has to offer. It may be appropriate to try and negotiate other types of remuneration, such as discretionary bonuses, extra annual leave or other paid leave days. The ability to do this will vary greatly depending on the firm, but it is worth considering these options.

Be realistic
Don’t lose sight of the financial landscape. Firms have just clawed their way out of the global financial crisis and are not feeling quite as charitable as they were in 2007. Take time to think about how your firm is doing.

Talk to recruiters and surf the net or the newspapers to get an idea of where the current demand for lawyers and legal work lies and salary expectations in the market. And remember, in some firms, first to third-year lawyers will have uniform salary increases in which there is little prospect of significantly influencing individual salary increases. Ultimately, firms want to retain staff and will do their best to make the right reward decisions. Active preparation and participation in the review process can really boost your professional development.

Remember, it is important to work hard on your career. If you don’t, no-one else will.

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1. Much of this advice is drawn from a law firm environment, but the points are obviously applicable to other legal roles. Accordingly, references to “firms” are also intended to encompass legal roles in other organisations.


3. There are a number of websites that list preparatory questions to assist prior to the appraisal process. For example, see Marcia Zidle, “Your Next Performance Appraisal: Make it Work for You”, http://performance-appraisals.org/experts/prepare.htm (accessed 15 February 2010).


5. For example, see David Maister’s podcast at http://davidmaister.com/podcasts.archives/5/57/ for advice on better understanding your supervisor needs, managing your relationship with your supervisor and communicating effectively.