

Employees Say Narrative-Based Performance Reviews Are the Fairest

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When it comes to performance reviews, it may be time to scrap the numbers, new research finds.

Cornell University researchers discovered that narrative-only feedback is considered the fairest by employees and gives a clearer understanding of how to improve performance, according to a Jan. 6 release announcing the results.

The study, published Dec. 22 in *Academy of Management Discoveries*, compared responses from 1,600 employees who received numerical-only, narrative-only, or combined feedback.

“When we started this project, we thought that combined feedback might be best,” said Emily Zitek, a professor in Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations. “But what we ended up finding was that the narrative-only condition was the best in terms of fairness perceptions and preventing people from feeling negatively evaluated.”

Researchers found that even mid-range numerical ratings can make employees feel negatively evaluated and unsure how to improve without additional context.

“If someone did only OK, they’re probably going to feel worse about it if they have numbers in their feedback than if they don’t,” Zitek said.

Even when numerical rankings were paired with narrative feedback, employees viewed those reviews as less fair than narrative-only reviews.

Researchers caution, however, that narrative-only feedback has limitations, particularly when performance reviews are tied to compensation or promotion decisions. In those cases, combined feedback formats may still be appropriate.

Ultimately, the researchers emphasize flexibility: different feedback formats may work better in different organizational contexts.

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