

The power of language: strengthening reporting through consistent communication

Adam Tracey-Patte
Australian Defence Force

Introduction

The language used by supervisors in formal feedback, annual reports or in the crew-room is not incidental: it is a leadership tool that frames identity and performance. The misalignment between spoken feedback and written reports does more than cause disappointment; it disrupts the developmental relationship that underpins effective leadership. Research on trust (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995), organisational justice (Colquitt, 2001) and performance management (Aguinis, 2019) supports the importance of credible, fair and consistent evaluation.

Words and Performance Reporting

Words shape expectations, guide behaviours, and influence career trajectories throughout a reporting period. Individuals are more likely to accept evaluations, learn from and trust them when those evaluations reflect the conversations that have occurred throughout the year. However, the credibility of the reporting system can be undermined and confidence diminished when informal feedback differs significantly from formal appraisal.

Language influences how people interpret their performance. Words of encouragement build momentum, words of caution prompt course correction, and neutral language often leaves people unsure of where they stand. Any shift between informal feedback and formal reporting therefore has significant consequences. When leaders speak one way throughout the year but write differently at the end, this inconsistency may:

- cause individuals to feel confusion, frustration and often a sense of unfairness
- leave high-performing people feeling undervalued when positive language is not carried into the final report
- allow underperformance to persist, and resentment to grow, when concerns about performance are avoided in informal feedback but then appear without warning in the appraisal.

The core problem is that trust deteriorates when the written narrative does not reflect the year's conversations. When language is inconsistent, the reporting process becomes less about performance and more about interpretation.

Language and Leadership Stewardship

Leaders are responsible for more than making decisions and delegations. They are entrusted with the care, guidance and development of the people they lead. This leadership stewardship requires clarity, honesty and consistency. Language is the medium through which

these obligations are fulfilled. Therefore, a performance appraisal needs to be viewed as the official record of a leader's words on the person's performance. It is not merely an administrative product. Moreover, a performance appraisal is an ongoing process, not a one-off conversation at the end of the year. The credibility of an appraisal depends on whether its language reflects the narrative established throughout the reporting period. It should confirm, not reinterpret, the messages conveyed through personal conversations, debriefings and informal feedback.

Accountability for the words we use

Accountability in many institutions focuses on what subordinates produce, while little scrutiny is applied to how leaders articulate and explain a performance review. Yet the quality and integrity of a report are inseparable from the choice of language. Promotion boards rely on the language used in reports. Written narratives are representations of observed performance. Leaders should therefore be held accountable for the consistency of their communication throughout the reporting period and for the quality, language and tone of their written assessments.

Consideration should be given to incorporating quality assurance mechanisms into the performance reporting system. Ways this could work include:

- promotion boards identifying poorly written or non-compliant reports for review by career management areas, with recurring deficiencies addressed through targeted feedback and professional development for reporting officers
- career management conducting periodic governance checks on a sample of reports to identify systemic issues, inform policy refinement, and provide targeted education where reporting standards are being applied inconsistently
- periodic calibration reviews to compare reporting standards across units and work areas, identify systemic issues, share examples of best practice, and reduce inconsistency in how performance is assessed and described.

Such mechanisms encourage accountability through deliberate and consistent communication, instead of language chosen simply because it feels safe or convenient at the end of a reporting cycle.

Conclusion

Consistency of language is not simply a writing skill; it is a leadership responsibility. The credibility of a reporting system depends on what the supervisor writes and whether the written words accurately reflect what has been said over the course of the reporting period. The integrity of our reporting system ultimately rests not on the form itself, but on whether a leader's written words faithfully reflect the conversations, expectations, and judgements delivered throughout the year.

References

- Aguinis, H. (2019). *Performance Management* (4th ed.). Chicago: Chicago Business Press. Retrieved from <https://studylib.net/doc/27235293/performance-management---herman-aguinis---4th--2019---...?p=6>
- Colquitt, J. (2001). On the Dimensionality of Organizational Justice: A Construct Validation of a Measure. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(3), 386-400. doi:10.1037//0021-9010.86.3.386
- Mayer, R., Davis, J., & Schoorman, D. (1995). An integrative model of organizational trust. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 709-734. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/258792>