

Painless

# PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS

A Practical Approach to Critical  
Day-to-Day Workplace Discussions



MARNIE E. GREEN

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# Praise for *Painless Performance Conversations*

“In this field-tested work, you will learn tips, tools, and techniques to help make the entire process of performance conversations a far more pleasant one for all concerned. It's a highly readable work and a must-read for all supervisors and managers.”

—**Edward E. Scannell, CMP, CSP**  
Coauthor, *Games Trainers Play* series;  
McGraw-Hill, Past National President;  
ASTD, IFTDO, MPI and NSA

“Marnie Green has a talent for presenting complicated, abstract ideas in a simple, no-nonsense way that is easy to apply. Her tips for establishing performance expectations and for initiating the toughest conversations take the pain out of these critical tasks.”

—**Kevin Klimas**  
President and Founder, Clarifacts, Inc.

“This book should be required reading for all managers. Those who follow the painless approach will have high-performing employees and enhanced organizational performance.”

—**Neil E. Reichenberg**  
Executive Director, International Public  
Management Association for  
Human Resources

“*Painless Performance Conversations* is a painless read. It actually was just plain fun! It will inspire you and others to try new techniques for working with your most valued



resource—your people. *Painless Performance Conversations* is a winner!”

**—Karen Thoreson**

President, Alliance for Innovation

“This book reflects Marnie Green's can-do attitude and offers step-by-step methods to which many will turn repeatedly as they meet the challenges of supervising others.”

**—Christine Kajikawa Wilkinson**

Senior Vice President, Secretary, and  
President of the Alumni Association,  
Arizona State University

“Marnie Green has helped the city of Las Vegas with leadership development for over a decade. Our employees are better off as a result of Marnie's advice on how to handle performance conversations.”

**—Elizabeth N. Fretwell**

City Manager, City of Las Vegas

“In her latest book, Marnie Green walks you through the steps to becoming your own expert on conducting performance conversations. Her practical counsel, exceptional writing style, and insight from years of coaching leaders make this a must-read book.”

**—Richard S Deems, PhD**

President, WorkLife Design; Coauthor of *Leading in Tough Times*, on Microsoft's and Eaton's Recommended Reading Lists;  
Author of *Interviewing: More Than a Gut Feeling*

# **Painless** **PERFORMANCE** **CONVERSATIONS**

A Practical Approach to Critical  
Day-to-Day Workplace Discussions

MARNIE E. GREEN

WILEY

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*For Steve, with whom conversations are always painless*

# Preface

Have you ever faced an employee issue that you would rather avoid? If so, this book is for you. *Painless Performance Conversations* deals with the hard stuff that comes with being a manager, which is why it has been a long time in the making. It sprang from consulting and coaching work that I've done over the years with hundreds of managers who struggle with the day-to-day conversations they need to have with their employees. In workshops and webinars based on my first book, *Painless Performance Evaluations: A Practical Approach to Managing Day-to-Day Employee Performance*, I saw that managers always seemed to understand the need to lead an annual performance evaluation conversation. They even recognize the importance of documenting performance examples throughout the year. The angst appears, however, when the manager has to talk with the employee about not meeting performance expectations. The face-to-face, heart-to-heart discussion can turn the most seasoned, robust manager into a wimp.

*Painless Performance Conversations* is written to give you the boost you need to tackle the conversations you'd rather avoid. There's no shame here. Regardless of your position within the organization and the number of years you've been managing, delivering the news that an employee is not stacking up can be tough. But it doesn't have to be.

Conversations are living and breathing events with a multitude of moving parts. Psychology, emotion, experience, perspective, and perceptions: they all affect the outcome of performance-related conversations. Much has been researched and written about how our brains function when we have to engage in conversations about potentially unpleasant topics. This book takes the next step and gives

you the tools you need to stay focused and feel confident when your brain is telling you to otherwise avoid the conversation.

## **The Pain in Performance Conversations**

So what makes certain performance-related conversations painful when others are not? Several elements are usually in play to create the pain, and they all come down to fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of losing control, and fear of failure all compel us to avoid the conversations that are critical to our operations. And, on top of it all, the conversation is usually with a person with whom you would like to have a positive relationship. It's more pleasant to work with others when there is an absence of conflict. So you avoid the important performance-related conversations in an effort to avoid stress.

The conversation may be painful because you are unclear about how the interaction will end. As the boss, you are used to having the answers. When you enter into a conversation with an employee about his or her performance, you may think you know exactly what the employee needs to do differently. However, the employee will have his or her own ideas, and this difference of perspective can be threatening, especially when you are used to being in control.

When it comes down to it, performance conversations are painful because you make them so. When you worry about losing control, your focus shifts away from the ultimate outcome: improved performance. Painful conversations become painless when the conversation is focused on helping the employee be successful in your organization. We all want to be successful, and that requires feedback.

At the basic level, all humans crave interaction and feedback; without it we cannot succeed. In the work environment, employees need, want, and expect your attention and insights. It is your job and your responsibility to provide employees with the time and attention they need to be able to meet the job's performance expectations. Yet a number of factors, such as a lack of time or confidence, get in the way of carrying out this essential duty.

After using the *Painless Performance Evaluation* framework for a number of years to help managers turn the performance evaluation process into a productive one, it became evident to me that the next step was to focus on developing tools and approaches that would make managers fearless in leading the challenging day-to-day conversations. Once you have the tools and the perspectives of painless performance conversations, you will have the confidence to be an effective manager.

## **Performance Conversation Tools**

Throughout this book you'll find a variety of tools that will make mastering performance conversations a snap. Watch for the following features in each chapter to guide your way:

- *Painless Perspectives*: summary thoughts that reinforce a key principle of painless performance conversations
- *Reflection Questions*: questions to encourage consideration of each concept as it applies to your own situation
- *Let's Apply It*: application exercises to link the concepts to real-life situations
- *Conversation Checkpoints*: summary ideas from each chapter
- *From the Field*: cases studies or reports from real-life managers who are using the painless performance conversations principles



## What This Book Is and Is Not

Let's be clear about the scope of this book. Managers have performance conversations every minute, every day, throughout the year. Performance conversations span the lifecycle of each employee, as illustrated in [Figure P.1](#). Conversations are necessary when the employee is new to the organization, when performance expectations change, when the annual performance evaluation is due, and when there are problems in the employee's performance that require corrective action. They offer an opportunity to provide positive feedback on a job well done and are critical to acknowledging and supporting the employee's contributions.

[Figure P.1](#) Performance Conversations Throughout the Life of an Employee



These conversations may run from easy to painfully difficult depending on the employee's performance and your relationship to the person. The focus of this book is not about new employee onboarding meetings, and it is not about discipline and corrective action. It will not address having performance evaluation meetings. You can find that information in *Painless Performance Evaluations: A Practical Approach to Managing Day-to-Day Employee Performance*. This book also does not dive deep into the importance of documenting the results of your performance conversations, although that is a critical step in the overall management of employee performance.

Instead, this book will guide you through the critical skills and tools you need to tackle those regular, everyday, normal conversations that spring up in the workplace and cause you to take pause. Painless performance

conversations are the ones you know you need to have, and the ones you usually have an excuse for putting off. They are the discussions that let employees know how they are doing, that refocus employees when they are heading down the wrong paths, and encourage employees to try something new because they are currently not as effective as they could be. In this book you will learn a painless approach to potentially painful conversations so that you can give employees the communication and feedback they crave and deserve.

Painlessly yours,  
Marnie E. Green

# Acknowledgments

You don't write a book like this alone. Many people have helped develop these concepts and field test them in real-life situations. In every workshop I facilitate, in every conference presentation I make, and in every coaching conversation I have, the principles of painless performance conversations have been formulated, tested, and revised. So for the individuals I'm unable to name here, please know that I appreciate the influence you have had on the development of this work.

I extend my thanks to Matt Holt and Shannon Vargo at John Wiley & Sons, Inc., for believing in this project and for helping me make it way better than where we started. Many thanks also go out to fellow authors and cheerleaders Ed Scannell and Dr. Richard Deems, who showed only enthusiasm for my efforts. You two are icons in my book.

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Everyone deserves a Jenniffer in their life. My long-time executive assistant Jenniffer Jarvis keeps me sane, makes me look good, and is always excited to take on the new and challenging projects I dream up. This book and my work would not be possible without her creativity, loyalty, and enthusiasm. Are you ready for the next big challenge, Jen?

Over the past few years, a slew of clients and colleagues have shared with me their painful performance conversation stories. Each chapter of this book includes one of their case studies. In particular, thank you to the following people for taking the time to write a case example upon which I could further develop: Cheryl Cepelak, Mike Sung, Kay Wilkinson, Jeff Knapp, Mark Olson, Debbie Kent, Rick Hunt, Jay Somerville, Roy Sugimoto, Stephen Cleveland, Jess Campbell, Ann Roseberry, Tamara Becker, Vicki Grove, and Jay Castellano.

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# 1

## Be a Catalyst

### Fostering Painless Performance Conversations

*One person can be a change catalyst, a “transformer,” in any situation, in any organization.*

—Stephen R. Covey

Employees initially come to work for a paycheck, but few stick around just for the money. In a survey conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management, 53 percent of employees listed pay as a very important aspect of their job satisfaction. At the same time, more than half said relationships with an immediate supervisor were a critical factor in their job satisfaction. Studies have repeatedly shown that employee satisfaction is directly linked to employees' relationships with their immediate managers. As a manager, you have a direct impact on employee retention and engagement, workplace morale, and organizational culture.

An important part of your job as a manager is to tap into the passion that brings employees to work each day. When those passions are engaged and employees feel valued, they are likely to perform at higher levels. One reason employees stick with an employer, and with you as their manager, is the feeling of being valued. Employees are eager for your feedback, and your job as a manager is to provide them the reinforcement they crave.