

Who Me? I'm Perfect, Thanks.

Susan Pinker

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Dear Susan:

Every year, around raise time, I'm asked by my company to fill out a self-evaluation form. The form includes questions on my years' achievements and hopes for the future. It asks me to rate the quality of my work, my productivity, job knowledge, reliability, and so forth as being "outstanding," "very good," "good," "improvement needed," or "unsatisfactory." It asks me where I think my weaknesses lie.

I'm always uncertain about how truthful I should be. I'm tempted to rate myself as outstanding in all areas. After all, if I think I'm less than that, wouldn't I be undercutting my raise potential? And if I let them know where I think my weaknesses are, I may be alerting them to deficiencies they may otherwise not have noticed; I think they'll hound me during the next year in these areas. Do you have any words of guidance?

Pretty Good, but Not Perfect

Dear Pretty Good:

It's unfair for you to have to rate yourself and your performance without knowing how this information will be used. Even if you knew, it's a little hard to be unbiased. Not only are you stuck inside your own skin, there's no absolute standard. And self-deception is the norm in most people, in any case. Experiments in which the outcome to a game is rigged, demonstrate that healthy people -- unlike depressed subjects -- consistently take credit for their successes and attribute their failures to bad luck or events beyond their control. So, if image-enhancing self-delusion is normal, as psychologists Alloy and Abramson showed in the late 70's and early 80's, then well-adjusted folks actually think they're outstanding; any dissonance passes under their radar. If it's absolute truth-telling your company is after, the whole exercise is a sham.

Besides, if your upward mobility rests on your self-ratings, what purpose would it serve to highlight your weaknesses, even if you're attuned

to them? As long your self-evaluation is not jarringly different from your employer's perception, unflinching honesty (whatever that is) would be self-defeating. Most workers realize this. "The self-rating research shows that there's a tendency for people to inflate their self-evaluations," says Suzanne Gagnon, who teaches Human Resources at McGill University's Faculty of Management. "If ratings are to be used for administrative reasons, then employees see it as in their interest to boost them." Evaluations are used for three purposes, she says: strategic, administrative, and developmental, and developing your employee's potential is the best use for these ratings. But if a manager doesn't communicate how the self-ratings will be interpreted – and no one ever sits down to give you feedback, comparing your self-appraisal with the company's in an honest exchange, then I say it's not only fair game to fudge a little, it's the norm.

Dear Susan:

Part of my new job involves committee work, an area that I am still learning. At a recent meeting, I was about to propose a motion when I stopped and quickly asked whether I was able to do so since I had organized the meeting and brought outside members to sit on this committee. My boss (a woman), who also sits on the committee, looked at me (also a woman) and said: "You're just supposed to sit there and look pretty." Everyone stopped, looked at their notes, and then continued with the meeting as if nothing happened. I never let on that the comment bothered me but I am ticked off at being denigrated. However, I don't know what to do since I am still on probation. Do I go to Human Resources and raise the issue with them? Do I sit down with my boss and tell her that the comment upset me? Do I ignore it?

Sitting here and Not Looking Pretty

Dear Sitting Here:

You have to talk to someone, but your boss and Human Resources are not going to be good listeners. Instead, scope out a confederate in the office in whom you can confide, someone who can help you take the pulse of your surroundings and put "the incident" in context. Erving Goffman, the sociologist who defined the roles people play in groups, would say that your

meeting was an orchestrated performance and that your boss let slip a damning piece of information that, in a split-second, eroded her mask. He refers to these faux-pas as “well-kept dark secrets or negatively-valued characteristics that everyone can see but no one refers to. When such facts are introduced, embarrassment is the result.” When your boss made this egregious comment, everyone looked down, a hint that she put her foot in it. Confronting her after the fact would be rubbing her nose in it.

You don't know her well enough to predict if she'll apologize or feel threatened by your feedback, flaying you in private this time. And whether gaffe or intentional put-down, going to Human Resources is like telling on the class meanie who calls you names. Venting will give you momentary relief but you'll pay later, big time. Instead, ignore the comment for now and keep on truckin'. Later, when your emotions are in neutral you can ask your boss in a matter-of-fact, dispassionate way, to clarify your role in meetings, explaining that you need to learn these details. It may look like you're eating humble pie, just “sitting pretty,” but her response will help you gauge whether this is a job you really want. After all, you are not the only one on probation. This is just a dress rehearsal: the entire organization, including your boorish boss, is on trial, too.

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