



Talent management – Feedback and reviews for legal teams

AT A GLANCE:



Embrace continuous feedback: Move beyond annual reviews by implementing regular feedback sessions every few months.



Context matters: Tailor reviews by understanding each team member's goals, circumstances, and personal context.



Goal-oriented reviews: Ground feedback sessions in clear, specific goals to make them effective and actionable.



Focus on actions, not traits: Give feedback based on specific actions rather than personality traits to encourage improvement and growth.



Address challenges openly: Don't shy away from difficult conversations; a constructive approach with clear expectations can drive positive change.

The shift to continuous feedback

In today's competitive environment, talent management is essential, yet many general counsels find it challenging. For lawyers without formal management training, handling HR and performance management issues can feel unfamiliar. However, the shift toward a dynamic, ongoing feedback model can make a big difference, creating a more effective and responsive system. For general counsel, especially those leading diverse and dispersed teams, replacing the traditional annual review with regular check-ins every two or three months can increase engagement, reduce stress, and improve overall team performance.

Why the annual review isn't enough

Research shows that both HR professionals and employees are often dissatisfied with annual performance reviews. A recent survey found that nine out of ten managers believe their companies handle reviews poorly. Moving to a more continuous review system provides greater engagement and gives legal teams a more agile approach to addressing challenges. Regular check-ins allow for feedback focused on output rather than character traits, helping to build a diverse talent pool that's assessed fairly.

Context is everything

Understanding each team member's professional goals, personal responsibilities, and unique circumstances can shape a more meaningful feedback process. Acknowledge their ambitions, challenges, and broader life context, such as family obligations. Managers who demonstrate awareness of these factors often see higher engagement and job satisfaction from their teams. Legal department leaders can foster a supportive environment by appreciating these broader dimensions of their team members' lives.

Make goals the backbone of reviews

Clear, specific goals make feedback sessions more productive. Regular reviews should align with tangible objectives and project-based targets, giving team members a clear path to follow and allowing for constructive feedback on specific outcomes. Goal-based feedback also enables general counsel to manage talent strategically, distributing responsibilities across the team in a way that supports both professional development and succession planning.

Focus on actions, not traits

In *Powerful*, Patty McCord describes how Netflix's unique culture was shaped by emphasising what employees do over who they are. Focusing on actions allows feedback to be more constructive and less personal. Rather than vague comments, provide specific examples and actionable advice. For instance, "I noticed that the report didn't include enough billing data for a comprehensive analysis. Can you revise it to include recommendations and more data points?"

Leveraging "magical feedback"

A study from Stanford and Yale found that feedback emphasising high expectations and belief in capability—referred to as "magical feedback"—boosts performance. By communicating high standards in a supportive way, feedback becomes motivating and builds a sense of belonging. Simple yet powerful, this approach can make a significant impact on morale and performance: "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and believe in your ability to meet them."

Navigating difficult conversations

Approach difficult conversations with a focus on context and specific, actionable feedback. Clearly outline the issues, suggest improvements, and follow up on progress. Recognise when an employee's role no longer aligns with team needs, as Netflix's growth revealed that people well-suited for one phase may not be for the next. Clear, direct communication around evolving needs can help maintain a strong team dynamic.

Understanding the bigger picture and long-term goals

Given the typically flat structure of legal departments, general counsel should take a pragmatic view of talent development, supporting team members' growth even if it means they may eventually move on. Consider investing in internal succession planning to ensure continuity of knowledge and corporate memory. This approach can turn departing team members into future allies, creating a network of peers that supports your team's mission and long-term success.

Based on an article written by Dr. Catherine McGregor, Strategic Consultant for the DLA Piper WIN Programme.