

Philly, Philly, Philly:
*What I learned about giving critical performance appraisals
from Philadelphia sports radio show callers
the day after the Eagles lost in the NFL playoffs.*

by Kevin Loney

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Managers spend training hours learning to give feedback with candor, to ‘smartly’ detail employees’ development plans, and to quantitatively evaluate the coaching a team has received. But every class on delivering critical feedback can benefit from spending a few hours listening to the real-life appraisals delivered by the passionate, knowledgeable fans of the Philadelphia Eagles after the team loses a pivotal game. The day after this year’s final Eagles game (in the first round of the playoffs), the local radio listening audience was the beneficiary of a master class in performance appraisals provided by callers from Manayunk, Kensington, and South Philly.

Providing free corporate training wasn’t why these callers stayed on hold all night. But when they added their passion to their distilled wisdom gathered from rehashing each play of the loss multiple times, any vagueness was removed and their appraisals were stark. While they did offer positive feedback as well, their blunt assessments about areas for improvement stood out; and since it is often the negative feedback messages that can be the hardest for new managers to deliver without hedging, these can serve as guides. Sometimes it takes a deep, passionate connection to your work to make great art, and they were freed by their love for the team to turn the practice of critical performance appraisals into its purest form.

And they said:

Your record is your record. You’re going into the playoffs as a team with a 9-7 win-loss record? That doesn’t mean you’re great or even bound for greatness. It means you’re a 9-7 team, one win better than 8-8. That’s just barely above average. You’re not a 13-3 team with a 9-7 record. To go forward, we have to be clear about where we’re starting from. So let’s be honest about what the record is, where we really are performance-wise, not what we think it could have been if a few things had happened differently along the way. Things *didn’t* go differently, and we need to talk about that, and if we don’t start from a shared understanding of the record then we can’t honestly talk about what needs to improve. Did your project schedule or defect rate or architecture deliverables or team improvement meet expectations, and sometimes exceed it? Did things mostly go okay? That’s 9-7. It’s an okay record. But it’s 9-7.

And your record is padded. 9-7? Over half of the Eagles’ wins came against teams in the NFC East, which was the worst division in the NFL. How bad was it? The bottom two teams in the NFC East each lost twice to the Eagles, finished the year a collective 7-25, and lost every game they played against teams with winning records. Those wins shouldn’t even count.¹ Take those 4 wins over the two bottom-dwellers away from the Eagles and when it came to playing legitimate teams the Eagles’ record was 5-7. At work, if every complex project or difficult delivery results in a delay or a customer-impacting incident, then when facing a real challenge

is that delivery record better than 5-7? Performance on complex, critical deliveries *matters the most* and has to be given the most weight in appraisals — because environments, business rules, testing and changes get more complex over time. If employees can't handle complex work now, are they on a trajectory to successfully handle complex work in the future? Or are they on a path to 5-7? What weighting is given to different parts of the performance record, and what development gaps need to be called out?

Which led the callers to:

We need better players. Coaches and managers (and fans) will have emotional attachments to the players they selected to join the team but the team is only as good as its players. Players can improve over time, but the players' growth depends primarily on their capacity and willingness to grow, and on their active participation in growth activities. Who's showing up for extra study, and are they doing it once or sticking with it? Who is acknowledging the need to push beyond their current performance level, and doing something about it? Maintaining a current training level is part of the core job requirements, not an exceptional behavior. At work, who's driving your initiatives and practices and moving your team forward? If you were looking ahead and planning from scratch for the team you're going to need three years from now, would you pick these players? If not, how would they need to change to meet that criteria?

Our players are not improving themselves fast enough. Other teams are improving faster, and these players should care more about that. There are a couple of 7-9 teams out there who were two or three field goals away from having winning records.² And those teams' players are staying fit this offseason so they don't hit the start of training camp and suffer pulled muscles that aren't ready for a high level of work. Are your team members putting in extra hours and training on weekends so they will be ready for repeated high stress situations? (And why are repeated activities stressful?) If their leader doesn't tell people they need to improve in those functions, how will they know where to focus their development efforts? How are you holding their leaders accountable for that messaging? Who is coaching the coaches?

You can't make slow people fast. A coach cannot turn a slow person into an Olympic sprinter. You *can* train people to run a little faster than they used to run for longer than they used to run, but you can't turn a slow cornerback into a world-class sprinter. So your job is to understand what they can do that will benefit the team the most, then grow that skill to its fullest potential. Then they can use their skills so effectively that they can shut down a fast wide receiver. And you can say they use their skills to the team's greatest benefit. That's your job, coach.

The team starts slowly every time because the coaches aren't holding the players accountable to start the game executing well. Every week, every game, every project, it's the same: play at a slow pace and fall behind while the opposing team executes well and takes the lead, or fall behind the project schedule from the start. Then slowly try to get back into the game — be a "second-half" team. Stop rewarding that — the team wasn't ready at the start. Execute every play well, from the first one. Putting more stress on the execution of any task later in the game is lowering its likelihood of success. Start on time, stay ahead of schedule, and stay there for the duration of the effort. Repeated surges of effort and manpower to rescue projects that are hurtling toward a hard deadline is an anti-pattern to successful solution delivery and adds unacceptable risk for the business. Don't reward it.

The coaches must not be giving this feedback to the players. What messages are leaders giving? Are they giving clear assessments? It's their job to articulate the standards to hold people to, provide the tools needed to reach them, review performance against those standards closely and fairly, and then replace people if they can't hit the team's targets. Those aren't the *player's* targets; they are the *team's* targets, the *business's* targets. How can we tell

the coaches are failing to get people to perform? Look at the metrics: a 9-7 team record.

And there is only one metric that matters: Did you win or lose? It doesn't matter how hard you tried; everybody else tries hard too. Did the team win? At work, what's the real goal? It's not to run the most tests on code sets or to have the most status meetings or get the most corporate plaques for effort; it's to enhance the customer experience and the business platform in a real, quantifiable and beneficial way, at a schedule and cost we agreed to. What gets us there? Remove any reported metrics that are not directly related to those tangible outcomes. We want a clear path to a win.

And while we're on the subject:

Stop blaming the refs. Did somebody make a call you didn't agree with? Don't play in a way that lets the refs have any say in the outcome; control what you should control. If it was your decision to take on the risk that started a chain of events that created a high risk event, you need to own that. Did you get all of the approvers for your availability-impacting change lined up well in advance, or did you risk someone throwing a flag right before the release date? That was your decision; own it. Or, plan differently — it's your plan.

*We need better backups and team depth. Where is Nick Foles when we need him?*³ Every member of the staff has to have a backup who can step in. You need the performance of the team to continue seamlessly regardless of the players involved. If any of your team members is 'irreplaceable', that's dangerous in terms of the risk it imposes on the business. Never accept that.

We need to practice in bad weather. You have to be able to execute in poor conditions while people are demanding to know how long the system will be down. How do you do that? By practicing in those conditions. Practice your releases and migrations repeatedly. Practice in adverse conditions — like a release that happens concurrent with one of your partners going offline for an unplanned outage. Or a hardware failure that occurs halfway through month-end processing, in a blizzard, with the CFO calling every hour for an update. What would you do? Know the plan before you need it.

We need to practice with the backups. Randomly switch out first-string players for backups during practices. Those backups need to know what they will do when they are asked to do it under pressure. As a coach/manager, you owe that training to them so they can be successful when called on. If you manage team leads, have them sit in for you at director-level meetings. Hand off the first pass of financial reviews or architecture reviews or hiring; they are your backups, after all. Prepare them for their next role. Ultimately, a team leader's performance is determined primarily by the measured outcomes of the team, and a director's performance is determined by the measured outcomes of all teams together — how did they impact the customer experience and the business platform, quantitatively? As their coach, you carry those numbers, the team's record, around with you the whole season. 9-7.

Finishing the drive:

If you care about your team improving as much as these callers do, you give feedback (both positive and corrective) early, often, and with integrity. If you care about giving honest feedback as much as these callers do, the clarity of your appraisal delivery will rival theirs. If you then do your part to lead and facilitate the team's development/transformation, the team will improve. If the team gets that message and support but doesn't improve, your players will scatter — looking for a different team lead who won't hold them accountable to the same high standards. And then you could draft new team members who want to be held to that high level of expectation and supported along their personal growth paths.

Challenge yourself the same way you challenge your team members. Coaches need to improve too, every year; the game keeps changing. The available players keep changing. But you know what projects are on the calendar and you know how to prepare for them. They won't all be easy wins; not every team is in the NFC East. But if you pay attention you'll learn something new every day, and at the end of the game the customer wins and the business wins and you can celebrate the victory and the lessons you learned together. And that's why you play this game.⁴

— Kevin Loney, February 2020.

NOTE: If there is any doubt about Eagles fans' willingness to deliver blunt feedback at any time, see this review of one of their wide receivers: <https://youtu.be/1dz7sFwpG6o>

Endnotes:

1. It gets worse. Of the 7 wins by the bottom two teams in the NFC East, two of them were when they played *each other*. Remove those games and their collective record was 5-23. And 2 of those 5 were wins over the Dolphins.
 2. Five, actually. The Colts (8-7-1), Broncos (10-6), Raiders (8-7-1), Falcons (8-7-1), and the Buccaneers (9-6-1) would have had winning records with 3 extra points in 2 or 3 of their games.
 3. Jacksonville.
 4. There is an inherent bias demonstrated when using American male-dominated team sports as analogies in articles and presentations, and the author has long avoided using them since not everyone played on a team, is American, is male, or cares about football at all. The goal with this choice is not to be exclusionary, as the author believes the same coaching advice would equally apply to a women's team in other sports. This piece being directly inspired by the calls the day after the Eagles' final game led to this specific choice. The Eagles lost to Seattle 17-9. Refs didn't even throw the flag...
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