MAKE YOUR
PERFORMANCE REVIEW
A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Question: My formal review is coming up and, while my reviews have mainly been positive, I get defensive about the negative feedback, usually minimize the impact of the favorable information by dwelling on the criticism and, overall, handle myself less well than I'd like to. How can I participate more effectively in my review, and follow up more productively after the review is over?

Answer: Your two-part question is a good one, but let's focus first on a question you didn't ask. What can you do before the review to anticipate a more productive session? Just as you would plan for a deposition or a negotiation session, you must prepare yourself in advance to be more effective during, and after, the review itself. Looking back before looking ahead is important. Conduct an assessment of your own past performance; reassess your prior review(s) and your responses. Ask yourself if you attained the goal(s) previously set. Do you see indications that your research and writing have improved? Has your ability to handle a number of assignments well and at once increased? Have you been given client contact? Participated in recruiting, training, professional development activities? Catalog, mentally if not on paper, the assignments you've had, the responsibilities you've taken, the efforts you've made, the feedback you've received. Anticipate, realistically, what your upcoming review will include, positive and negative. Senior lawyers universally agree: there shouldn't be any surprises at your formal review. Have in mind, as you prepare, the purposes of the review session:

✓ To provide you with an evaluation of your past performance and to inform you of your employer's expectations for your future work;

✓ To serve as the basis for your compensation adjustment, by way of raise and/or bonus;

✓ To apprise you of where you stand vis-a-vis partnership, promotion, progression within the firm or organization; and

✓ To keep open the channels of communication between you and your supervisor(s).

Therefore, you are expected to, and should, join in a dialogue during the review. The session should be a conversation, not a confrontation. If you are totally removed or overly emotional, you are missing an opportunity to gain information and to impress upon your employer your commitment to professional growth and to doing the job well. Handle your review professionally, not defensively, but as an involved participant. Listen with an open mind in order to learn. If anything is said that you don't understand, inquire. Ask to see any written comments about your performance, if possible. Ask for concrete advice on how to proceed, for suggestions on programs to attend or special reading you can do, for guidance in broadening your base of
experience, for tips on focusing your energies in the future. Show interest, express your enthusiasm, and convey your positive intentions.

Conversely, if something significant with which you disagree comes up, show your disappointment and state your view. In certain circumstances, consider asking for time to think about the unexpected comment before responding in depth, and arrange a time for a follow-up conversation. Fight the natural reaction, though, to tune out or deny or simply to fight off negative feedback. Try as hard as possible to reflect on all the comments, criticism and praise alike.

To put this general advice into concrete terms, consider the associate who was told at his review that his writing was considered competent, but not inspired. Instead of reacting as if personally slighted, the associate remained emotionally grounded. He responded, evenly: "Tell me how I can become an inspired writer. Who in the department should I work with in that effort? Are there writing courses I should take?" The associate listened. He learned. What could have degenerated into a charged and difficult interchange was elevated. Everyone gained. Participating effectively in your review is an art and a challenge; your efforts to remain in control, to use a positive and mature approach, will be noticed and appreciated.

After the review, be professional and productive as well. If you've been given anything in writing, put it in your "Formal Review" file. Review it periodically in order to remain cognizant of what went well—what you need to continue to do to maintain the high quality of work for which you were praised. Remind yourself from time to time of those areas in which you need to strengthen your performance.

Soon after the review, while your recollections are clear, summarize your impressions and create a "to do" list, a set of tasks and goals to guide you. In this way, not only do you establish a plan for the future, but you document guideposts to assess your progress when you again look back in order to prepare for the next review. Between reviews, refer to your list periodically, seek out informal feedback on your work - ask for the guidance you need, project by project, assignment by assignment, so you can assess and improve your performance on an ongoing basis.

You'll find, over time, that you are engaging in a career planning process by participating, actively and positively, in your own review. It's a no-lose proposition.

Attorney Kathy Morris is the founder of Under Advisement, Ltd, providing career planning and job search guidance for lawyers and law students. She was the first Chief Lawyer Training Officer at Sidley Austin, LLP, the creator and Director of the American Bar Association Career Resource Center, and a long-time Adjunct Professor at Northwestern University School of Law. Ms. Morris practiced law in Honolulu, Hawaii and Chicago, Illinois; she earned her JD in 1975 from Northeastern Law School in Boston and a BA with Honors in 1971 from the University of Michigan. For more career advice and information, please go to www.underadvisement.com.