

# GIVE YOUR SPOUSE A PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Why limit year-end progress reports to the workplace? Tips for assessing family and friends

BY JENNIFER BREHENY WALLACE

**MY HUSBAND** has a stack of year-end reviews on his desk—reviews from his bosses, reviews by his peers, reviews of his staff. And then there's one from me. What started as a joke between us 10 years ago—over piles of socks left on the floor—has become a yearly tradition: our year-end review as a couple.

Performance reviews, for better or worse, have long been a staple of corporate America. Outside the office, I've found that they can also open up a whole new way of communicating with family and close friends. And they're a handy way to air minor grievances.

Several couples I know have their own version of a yearly performance review. One refers to it as the "State of Our Union." Another takes a more serious approach to what they call their annual "Board of Directors Meeting," complete with a formal agenda in four sections: personal, professional, philanthropic and spiritual. A couple with adult children makes their review a full-family affair, with a psychologist

## Call it a 'State of Our Union.'

on hand in case the conversation gets heated. In explaining why he conducts reviews at home, a friend said, "Sometimes I think we're more honest with people at work than we are with our own family."

For our own review, my husband and I talk over dinner about our "accomplishments" over the past year as a couple, the "areas for improvement," the "goals" we want to set for the year ahead and the "next steps" we are going to take to get there. Comments run the gamut from petty complaints, like laundry on the floor, to important goals, like setting time alone as a couple. These reviews

force us to focus and reflect on the big picture, to give priority to what's really important to us in our very busy lives.

Our review generally takes place close to New Year's Eve, making it a handy New Year's resolution list, albeit one written by another person. The tone of ours tends to be tongue-in-cheek. For more serious reviewers, a friend suggests adopting what's called the "hamburger technique." Structure your review as if it were a hamburger: soft bun to start (ease in with compliments), solid meat (the big criticism), lettuce (room to grow), then finish with another soft bun (more closing compliments).

Our annual review has even grown to include family and close friends. Everyone who has heard about it seems interested in giving it a try, perhaps because there aren't very many socially



acceptable ways to tell friends about the little things that bother you. That's where the review comes in handy.

When a couple close to us heard about our couple's review ritual, they requested to be reviewed on the spot—and then turned around and reviewed us, too. Apparently, I'm not so good at keeping my calendar and have canceled

on them more times than I should have. They suggested that I turn the scheduling over to my husband, who now books our monthly get-togethers. On the rare occasion that we have to postpone a dinner now, they jokingly—or not so jokingly—say, "Don't think this won't come up in your review."

A friend I've known for 20 years

was habitually late—really late—to our dinners. Over dinner a couple of years ago, I told her I was giving our friendship a year-end review. She laughed, and I said, "You have always been there for me, and I trust you completely as a friend. I also trust that you're going to be at least a half-hour late every time we meet." She nodded, smiled and took the comments in the spirit they were given. And she's never been late again.

Not everyone is as open to being reviewed. My advice: Know your audience and your boundaries. Drinks with a friend turned into an impromptu, year-end intervention for one woman I know. After a positive start, the "reviewer" launched into a critique of the friend's boyfriend, citing unsolicited "areas for improvement," and encouraged her friend to end the relationship. The friendship never recovered. Some feedback is better left unsaid.

In a controversial move, my husband took the initiative last year to write up a review of my mother. That's right, a review of his mother-in-law. He handed her an envelope on Christmas morning with the words "Year-End Review" plastered in bold across the front. Pale-faced, she opened it—and then started to smile as she read her glowing reviews as a mother and grandmother. Scanning to the bottom, she found an area for improvement: Meatball production down from peak in 2010.

The review worked. We now always have a freezer full of meatballs.

*Ms. Wallace is a writer in New York.*

WATCH A VIDEO ON YOUR PHONE



Scan this code for an interview with Jennifer Wallace, or watch at [WSJ.com/review](http://WSJ.com/review).