

IN DEFENCE OF APPRAISALS

Over the past couple of decades, as more employers have woken up to the fact that it's people that make the difference between success and failure, the performance appraisal has proven an increasingly indispensable management tool. For many managers, however, annual appraisal season is seen as an unwelcome time filled with complex forms, awkward and time-consuming interviews, and surly, disappointed team members.

But, love them or loathe them, appraisals are here to stay – and rightly so. Used appropriately they are a key method of assessing ability, performance shortfalls and training needs, not to mention a great way to align business aims with individual objectives.

Of course, by their very nature, appraisals are a highly sensitive tool, requiring – among other qualities – tact, honesty, fairness and sensitivity. To get the most from the process, managers have to learn how to deal constructively with a variety of potentially difficult reactions they will encounter, ranging from defensiveness, silence and boredom to outright hostility and even tears. Because, when organised and conducted well, appraisals can be a strong motivator that provides a clear signal to employees that the organisation is interested in and cares about them as an individual. Used inappropriately, however, they can do more harm than good.

Most managers want to do well by and for the people they work with. But where personal opinion and subjectivity prevail over tangible objectives and achievement it is too easy to make common assessment errors. And, at the risk of sounding like a grey-haired consultant, in my time I've come across more than a few appraisal howlers.

The most frequent mistake is popularly called the 'horns or halo' effect. When working with a company to help strengthen the



With the annual appraisal season looming, **Lyn Bicker** explains why managers should look forward to this valuable opportunity to provide team members with feedback that will boost their performance

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purpose and perception of its performance management processes, I came across a typical example of this 'hell or heaven' approach. Under pressure to deliver a project on time, a supervisor was delighted when a team member made an excellent contribution to a small but critical programme element. A comforting, golden glow was cast over other, equally important but less successful elements under assessment. Within the hour, the unwitting worker grew virtual wings and a halo. Conversely, one serious fault can unfairly influence an appraiser's marks for more positive work. Equally quickly, the individual sprouts horns.

AVOID EXTREMES

Another typical appraisal error is the 'central tendency'. Some managers are reluctant to score people at the extremes of a scale, preferring the safe position of sitting on the fence and awarding marks in the middle. When this happens it can be a warning sign that those doing the appraising have not allowed – or been allowed – adequate preparation time. The prerequisites of decisive rating are a serious approach, considered thought and substantiated marking. In my view, it's better to postpone an appraisal interview than deliver a substandard one. An accurate appraisal is always more beneficial than a fast overview.

Being close to the person you are rating requires the strength of character to divide objective performance assessment from friendship. If you have any doubts in that regard, it's probably best to find another manager who can conduct the interview dispassionately. And while leniency will appeal to sensitive managers who would prefer not to hurt a person's feelings, this is a mistake that will bring repercussions. An unwillingness to deal with poor performance fuels resentment among others and encourages a slack work ethic.

Failing to address poor performance in a timely manner will not necessarily avoid confrontation. Most of us prefer to sidestep conflict,



Staff appraisals are a time for constructive feedback – not something to fear

deploying skill and experience to defuse or redirect a potentially negative situation. Some would tremble in their management boots at the prospect of dealing with poor performance by a strong individual who enjoys squaring up to authority. But dodging the nettle does not make it easier to grasp.

In one example I came across, a manager was under pressure to deliver annual assessments on time, so whizzed a consistently poor

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performer through their review, but was relieved to identify one area that could be termed successful. The worker was given a large and public pat on the back. Team mates were somewhat surprised and not a little disgruntled. It transpired the manager's motive was to nudge the struggling employee upwards – out of the team and department.

This wasn't a tactical short cut but an ill-considered cul-de-sac. Professional and personal ethics were

trashed. Time, effort and energy wasted. False hope served only to demoralise the hapless member of staff – and the manager ended up looking highly incompetent.

A good manager will work with an individual to help change their behaviour to improve performance. The essential ingredients here are motivation – the individual must want to change – and confidence – the employee must feel they are in safe corporate hands and be secure in

HOW DOES YOUR PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT MEASURE UP?

■ Line of sight

Ensure there is a clear link between organisational objectives and individual goals.

■ Take possession

Involve employees in new or revised performance measures to help create ownership that will also contribute to improved performance.

■ Make it easy

Keep the performance management process as simple and accessible as possible.

■ Develop or hone your skills

If you're new to performance appraisal scenarios and techniques, invest in some training. If you're not, ask yourself if you might benefit from a refresher course.

■ Minimise surprises

An appraisal is no place for surprises. If someone is under-performing regularly, tackle it early. Don't wait for appraisal time. Conversely, make sure you let people know as soon as they've done something well.

■ Avoid the HR tick-box

Position the system as a management tool that benefits business units and their managers, rather than as an HR paper chase. A culture where performance management is an evolving process instead of an annual event will support this.

■ Stay focused

Ensure the review process adopts objective and quantitative criteria. Make individual objectives achievable and keep them to a realistic number.

■ Link reviews to reward

Remuneration systems are another subject for another day, but try to ensure they are aligned with salient objectives. However, do link appraisals to training and development and not just to reward.

■ Deal with the negatives

If you don't know how to deliver negative feedback or address poor performance, don't use your appraisee as a guinea pig. An inexperienced approach may serve only to alienate them.

their own ability to develop. In identifying the behaviour that produces poor performance, the worker's self-esteem needs to remain intact. They should feel relieved their shortcomings – of which they are probably all too aware – are being sensitively but objectively addressed. If I had to distil all this into a single sentence, this would be it. For a review good or bad, mix honesty, trust, clarity and realistic goals. But stir, don't shake. ■