

Performance Appraisal - Make it Meaningful and Motivational

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Performance Appraisal – What is it?

Performance appraisal (also called performance evaluation or performance review) is a structured, periodic, reflective discussion between an individual employee and his or her line manager, concerning the employee's actual work performance, behaviours and future developmental needs in relation to agreed goals and behavioural standards.

When there is a clear link between what an organisation is striving to achieve and what each individual is expected to deliver it makes it easier for employees to feel connected to the organisation and motivated by their work. The performance appraisal discussion is just one method of managing and reviewing performance and should be viewed in the context of a wider performance management system where all employees have a shared understanding of:

- The organisation's strategic vision, goals and values
- The organisation's policies and procedures
- The organisation's work standards and ethics
- Departmental and team goals
- Individual goals and job descriptions

Many organisations in the community and voluntary sector (particularly those in which employees have regular client contact) also operate "Support and Supervision Processes" where the employee and the line manager meet regularly to discuss the employee's workload and work standards and take time to reflect on how the employee is dealing with particular workplace challenges. While support and supervision has much in common with performance appraisal, the focus is generally short-term and operational as opposed to the longer-term, developmental focus of the performance appraisal discussion.

Avoiding Common Mistakes

When caring for company assets it natural for employers to ensure that, for example, company vehicles are serviced regularly and photocopiers are well-maintained and used in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. And yet, when it comes to the 'care and maintenance' of employees, some organisations view performance appraisal as an interruption to the day job rather than an essential people-management activity. As an appraiser you may have many employees to appraise but for each appraisee, your handling of their appraisal discussion is a critical event for them.

Performance appraisals should take place at least once per year and ideally twice per year. When conducted effectively they can be a powerful, motivating and stimulating event. Appraisers should ensure that the appraisal discussion is not driven in a mechanistic way by the headings on the appraisal form. While a well-designed appraisal form will help to guide the discussion, remember that the appraisal stationery in itself is not a substitute for a professional working relationship rooted in effective, regular, two-way communication and feedback.

A well-handled appraisal can often be a catalyst for fostering higher levels of performance; a poorly handled one can send your best employee scurrying to scour the situations vacant pages. Here are some of the common mistakes that appraisers make:

- Being unprepared
- Permitting external interruptions
- Talking too much
- Providing unbalanced, unspecific or no feedback
- Failing to show respect for the appraisee
- Failing to set clear-cut goals
- Failing to explore developmental opportunities for the appraisee
- Failing to follow through on promises made during appraisals

Preparing – Tips for Appraisers

Look back: How well did the appraisee perform against the goals set during the last appraisal discussion? What aspects of the work did the appraisee perform particularly well and what aspects could the appraisee have handled in a better way?

Look forward: What would you like the appraisee to achieve in the coming review period and how will you assist the appraisee in achieving it?

Look inside: What appraisee knowledge, skills, behaviours and attitudes are well-developed and in what ways can the appraisee benefit from further training and development?

Look outside: What changes are happening in the sector that might impact on the role of the appraisee? How can you ensure that you and the appraisee are prepared to respond in a proactive, rather than a reactive way?

Preparing – Tips for Appraisees

Look back: How well did you perform against the goals agreed during your last appraisal discussion? What aspects of your work did you perform particularly well and what aspects of your work could you have handled in a better way?

Look forward: What would you like to achieve in the coming review period and how will you achieve it?

Look inside: What knowledge, skills, behaviours and attitudes have helped you to be an effective employee and a fully participating team member? What additional support or training and development do you think you need?

Look outside: What changes are happening in the sector that might impact on your role? How can you ensure that you are prepared to respond in a proactive, rather than a reactive way?

Conducting an Appraisal

- Prepare thoroughly by reviewing all documentation relating to the appraisee's performance during the period under review (for example this can include, the job description, time and attendance records, on-the-job performance records, client feedback, goals set at the last review and any other relevant information).
- Allow adequate time for discussion.
- Listen actively and encourage the appraisee to reflect on the performance delivered.
- Highlight the appraisee's achievements and any initiatives taken during the review period.
- Consider any barriers to achievement that the appraisee may have encountered.
- In situations where aspects of the appraisee's performance need to be improved, provide clear and appropriate feedback.
- Identify any additional support, training or development needed.
- Agree the goals for the next review period.

- Agree checkpoint dates – these are dates when you will have brief discussions to ensure that the appraisee is meeting expectations and to check if any additional support is needed.
- Document your meeting by completing and agreeing the relevant paperwork in line with the company's performance appraisal procedure.

Giving Feedback – Practical Tips

The ability to give fair and honest feedback is central to performance management. Positive feedback is often overlooked as a motivating force and if employees see that positive feedback is given freely when deserved they are much more likely to accept constructive, critical feedback in the spirit in which it is offered.

In cases of significant under-performance, constructive, critical feedback should always be given as close in time to the situation or event as possible and where appropriate, the company disciplinary procedure should be invoked. To highlight this point a supervisor in a client manufacturing company once put it like this: *“You don't wait for six months to tell an employee that he is driving a forklift truck erratically – you stop him there and then and address it.”*

Clearly this is sound advice, particularly where there has been an obvious deviation from the required standards. But what about situations where an employee's teamwork or communication style is just beginning to cause a problem? The identified behaviour may not yet be serious enough to be dealt with through the disciplinary process and yet, if left unchecked, it may escalate and cause difficulties for team members, customers or clients. Allied to this, the employee may be unaware of the impact of the behaviour and may be puzzled as to why his or her career is not progressing as expected. Constructive, critical feedback of this nature, given in a person-centered, compassionate way, is perhaps the greatest developmental gift that an employer can give to an employee. When discussed as part of the performance appraisal both the appraiser and appraisee can explore the extent of the desired improvement and the level of support or training and development required to achieve it.

When giving constructive, critical feedback it is useful to bear the following in mind:

- Focus on the identified behaviour rather than the personality or assumed motives of the appraisee.
- “Seek first to understand, then to be understood” – ask for the appraisee's views and share your own views about the identified behaviour.
- Provide clear examples of where you have observed the identified behaviour.
- Seek the appraisee's understanding of the impact of the identified behaviour and share your own view.
- Ask the appraisee to describe their thoughts or feelings about the impact of the identified behaviour and share your own thoughts and feelings about it.
- Agree an action plan for addressing the identified behaviour and provide personal and organisational support as appropriate.

Motivating Questions

Here are 10 motivating questions that appraisers can have in their toolbox. (Appraisees may also find it useful to consider the answers to these questions when preparing for appraisals.)

1. On a scale of 1-10, how happy are you in this role?
2. How can we make better use of your skills and talents right now?
3. What are the most motivating aspects of the work that you do?
4. What are the biggest work challenges that you are facing?
5. What's new that we can do?
6. What can we do to make our team more effective?

7. How can we improve in areas such as client or customer care, communications, quality, health and safety, publicity, administration [or any other relevant job-specific areas]?
8. What would make our communications more productive?
9. As your manager, what do you suggest that I do more and less of?
10. What joint initiatives can we take to help us to work more effectively together?

Further Reading:

- Gillen, T (2007). *Performance Management and Appraisal*. CIPD Toolkit. 2nd edition London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.
- McMahon, Gerard V (1999). *Performance Appraisal Skills – Best Practice for Managers*. Oak Tree Press, Dublin.
- www.cipd.co.uk (Sign up for a free account which gives you access to hundreds of excellent fact sheets and guides.)

Author

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