

THE (ALMOST) PAINLESS PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

Conducting performance appraisals generally ranks near the top of most managers' lists of least favorite tasks. Likewise, most employees also dread receiving appraisals. The reasons for this disdain of performance appraisals vary. In some cases, apprehension exists because of the heavy responsibility that comes with appraisals. Compensation decisions, career path opportunities, and confrontation of problem areas all are possible results of the process. Managers fear offending their employees, and employees are concerned about unfair criticism. On the other hand, some organizations view the performance appraisal process as no more than a tedious administrative requirement. As a result, appraisals produce no growth or improvement for employees. The good news is, if handled correctly, the appraisal process provides one of management's best tools to improve employee performance and thus the overall effectiveness of the organization.

Following are a few tips for making performance appraisal less daunting and more effective:

Get feedback. Peers of the employee can be valuable sources of information. Select these peer appraisers carefully, and ask them to list 3 strengths and 3 weaknesses of their fellow employee. It is best to seek peer input from several individuals, so you can scan the feedback for common themes.

Don't overlook the value of self-appraisal; often employees themselves can help turn up problems or positives the manager may have missed. Self-appraisals also tell the manager the accomplishments, of which the employee is most proud, as well as how open he is to criticism, and how realistic he is in his expectations. Some questions to include in the self-appraisal form:

What were my specific accomplishments during this appraisal period?

Which goals or standards did I fall short of meeting?

What changes would improve my performance?

Do I need more experience or training in any aspect of my current job?
How could it be accomplished?

What have I done since my last appraisal to prepare myself for more responsibility?

Simply copying the employee's remarks is a temptation for some managers. Resist it, as simply parroting back an employee's own thoughts does nothing to improve his performance.

Make performance appraisal an ongoing process. Most organizations require a formal performance appraisal annually. Our memories aren't too reliable over a one year period, so keeping track of performance throughout the year is essential. One method that has worked well for me is to set up a folder for each employee and simply drop notes of significant performance events (good or bad) as they occur throughout the year. This takes just a few minutes, and the information is quite helpful when writing the annual appraisal.

Don't hesitate to provide performance feedback whenever it is warranted, not just at "review" time. A pat on the back or an expression of concern from a manager can be much more effective when it is timely.

Set aside uninterrupted time. This applies both to preparing the appraisal and conducting the meeting with the employee. Preparation should occur away from the workplace to minimize interruptions. In addition, the internal consistency of the appraisal is better if it is written all at once rather than in several short sessions.

The best location for the performance appraisal meeting is a neutral one; not the manager's office, but a conference room or other private meeting room. Schedule a minimum of 60 minutes for each appraisal meeting so as to allow plenty of time for discussion. The here-it-is, read-it-and-sign it approach to appraisal is insulting to the employee and generally non-productive.

Focus on the future. The primary focus of the appraisal meeting should be to set the stage for future performance enhancement, not to rehash the ups and downs of the past year. The cornerstone for performance management is setting clear expectations. Nobody wins when the rules are unknown or vague. In addition, make sure that employees feel free to turn to you when they need help. Finally, every performance appraisal meeting should include the establishment of measurable goals for the next appraisal period. Ideally, the employee should be involved with setting these goals, so as to increase his commitment to their attainment.

Most people respond to a show of confidence, and the performance appraisal process provides a great opportunity for managers to convey their confidence in employees. The "self-fulfilling prophecy" theory has demonstrated that most

people will perform about as well as we expect them to. Let your employees know what you expect, provide them with the tools to do their jobs, and then get out of the way and let them shine!