Performance Appraisals The Annual Rain Dance

During my twenty odd years of working for someone else, I have had my performance evaluated by all sorts of bosses. So have all of us. But can anyone recall an appraisal exercise that was devoid of terror, trepidation, and trauma?

Most performance evaluations are like a ride to the operating theatre. You don't walk in, you are wheeled in. You have no control over it, you have no input (in fact, you are drugged and kept alive by respirators). Everyone shrinks away from it. No one wants to talk about it. This is true for those who evaluate as well as for those who are evaluated. No one escapes the carnage. Here's a typical scenario after supervisor Adam has completed the evaluation of subordinate Bobby.

Bobby tells his wife that night, "What does he mean, I must do better? When I press him for specifics, he just waffles. And, do you know, he doesn't do things half as efficiently as I do. Yet, he has the gall to tell me that I should improve. I have no idea what he wants of me. He is just a critic when it comes to others."

At the same time, Adam is telling his spouse about Bobby's evaluation. "Whew, am I glad that it is over. I hate this review bit. I have no idea how to put these things across. Anything negative that I say will be remembered forever and used against me. Heaven knows if I got across to Bobby at all. Ah, well, let's have dinner, dear."

Even if Adam can forget about it, you can bet your last dollar that Bobby is not going to forget about it. Life returns to supposed normalcy the next day. Whatever the appearance, this is hardly the normalcy that can foster better performance and motivation in the year ahead. In fact, the organization has just prepared itself perfectly for a year of recriminations and gnashed teeth between Adam and Bobby.

The truth is that human nature hates to receive feedback or even give it. Everyone has bloated egos, and performance evaluations threaten to deflate the ego. Funnily enough, people are uncomfortable offering appreciation or criticism, except in the third person. When someone is not there, I may say a couple of good things about that person. More likely, I would burn him or her at the stake in absentia with a gleam in the eye.

Everyone realizes how important performance appraisals are; few however do anything to make them truly valuable and positive experiences for the giver and receiver of the evaluation. Does your boss's boss rate your boss's ability to conduct value-added performance evaluations? How many organizations have ever given thought to this? It is more or less treated like a laundry job do it fast, and forget it faster. And repeat the process year after year.



Add to this, situations where the subordinate is far more effective than the boss, and terror truly strikes. The boss has two choices either recognize it or somehow camouflage it completely by long winded descriptions of some innocuous shortcoming. How many would choose the first option? The boss is terrified that publicly recognizing a subordinate's star performance will jeopardize his/her position. After all, what would he/ she do if his/her boss were to ask, "Well, so your subordinates are great, what have you been doing?" My reply: "Building my subordinates, that's what!"

A multinational company has a four-point appraisal scale Below, Satisfactory, Fulfills, and Exceeds. That's fine. But here is the catch the rater is instructed that not more than 1% should receive an overall rating of "Exceeds and even within the ten odd attributes rated, no more than 1 attribute should receive 'Exceeds Good grief! If you run a ship where only 1 in ten people should be per forming at the

peak, you must be hiring a busload of mediocre men Should this be the driving force behind a company’s recruiting policies? How can any corporation use such a delightful instrument so disgustingly?

What do you think the outcome of such a policy would be? Either the company will really go out and seek average performers (which it does), or Mould them into mediocrity in a couple of years by repeatedly hammering it into their heads that they are indeed only performing at a satisfactory level. No wonder people hate performance appraisals.

Here’s another beautiful performance killer. This enlightened company has a Development Action Sheet (DAS), as the second part of the appraisal process for its senior staff (whatever that means). Great, you tell yourself, now this is a corporation that really cares to develop its people. The DAS has a column called Candidate’s Estimated Potential (CEP). This ostensibly gives the rater the responsibility of gauging how high up the person is potentially capable of going, assuming he/she has equal opportunity to do so. Isn’t that nice? What happens in reality is this it is used as the perfect weapon to destroy creativity, curiosity, initiative, and intellect. To make matters worse, the boss doesn’t have to show the subordinate the CEP, if he/she so chooses. If I am told that assuming equal opportunity exists (which doesn’t, not even in your wildest dreams), I can go up two notches out of twenty-two while I still have twenty years of potential employment ahead of me, I leave it to you to imagine what its effect on me is likely to be. Instead, why not ask subordinates to rate their bosses for their CEP? If ten of my subordinates report that my CEP is pretty high, while my only boss rates my CEP as low, as a favor to the company my boss should be fired.

What kind of performance appraisal systems have you set up in your company? Are you in the race for Fortune’s ten most dreaded companies?



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