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Painless performance appraisals



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Few interactions put both employees and supervisors on edge more than the performance appraisal.

In fact, management philosophies vary wildly on the entire process. It's probably appropriate, therefore, that I start by stating my beliefs:

- Employees deserve clear and regular feedback on how they are doing.
- Feedback should be provided both on what was accomplished (hard skills) as well as how it was accomplished (soft skills).
- Documented feedback provides clarity and provides a historical record of what was discussed.
- Annual compensation adjustments, at least for truly outstanding and very low performers, should be tied to performance.
- Employees also deserve periodic, honest and frank dialogue regarding changing personal or business situations, interests and developmental opportunities.

I'm confident that most people — both managers and employees alike — agree with the above list. Where the agreement breaks down is in how the philosophies are practiced, or perhaps more accurately, not practiced.

Let's start with the principle that clear, regular and balanced feedback is every employee's right — and every supervisor's responsibility.

If relaxed discussions are occurring on at least a monthly basis, issues can be addressed while they're small.

Feedback regarding an issue to be addressed is more readily embraced when provided in a safe, less formal environment and offset with positive feedback.

Also, employees are more apt to accept feedback when it comes from a supervisor who they know has their best interest at heart because they are willing to regularly invest their valuable time to simply talk.

These regular discussions take the surprise factor out of formal appraisals. Documented strengths and weaknesses in the performance appraisal already have been regular discussion topics, as well as progress — or lack thereof — against previously stated issues or concerns.

Save the surprises for your significant other's birthday; they're rarely appreciated by employees during performance appraisals.

Both the end result (accomplishment) as well as the means (methods used) should be topics for regular feedback discussions and the performance appraisal.

Both impact the success of the organization and the individual.

Documentation clarifies and retains the feedback.

It reinforces the positive message for strong performers.

In the case of underperformers, documentation provides legal justification for potential corrective action.

All too often a strong manager decides to finally address a perpetual low performer inherited from a weak manager, only to find that no documentation of prior issues exists. In essence, they're back to square one.

It's a good idea to have managers share and reach agreement on their assessments of team members with other managers. This calibrates managers and ensures that all employees will be graded on the same curve, resulting in a fair process.

Karl from Lake Wobegon ("where all the children are above average") isn't allowed to grade his entire team as superstars. It also helps managers understand their blind spots regarding various employee issues.

Along those same lines, forcing the employee population to follow a strict distribution ("thou shalt designate the bottom 15 percent as underperformers and the top 15 percent as high performers") seems silly, especially if the organization is employing best practices in hiring, providing feedback and developing employees.

Instead, identifying ranges (e.g., no more than 20 percent of employees can be designated as underperformers and no more than 20 percent of employees can be designated as top performers) makes more sense.

Annual pay increases should be withheld or very small for underperformers and above average for high performers. This reinforces the seriousness of the situation for the former and recognizes the latter.

It's important to spend ample time looking forward during the appraisal discussion. Where is Joe hoping to go within the organization? What training is Samantha interested in receiving? What potential changes within the organization or Barb's life could impact the relationship? Are any actions required now to prepare for that eventuality?

Again, capturing agreements in writing for employee development plans means they are much more likely to happen. Without a record of these discussions, the words drift out of the room through the ventilation system and are lost to daily responsibilities.

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RICK SAYS

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