

Performance Appraisals

FROM MEANINGLESS TO MEANINGFUL

Candice Solie - *Profile Evaluations, Inc.*

Mention performance appraisal to a group of supervisors and managers and eyes begin to roll. Visions of meaningless paperwork and uncomfortable performance-appraisal interviews with subordinates start playing in their heads. Mention performance appraisal to a group of employees and judgments like “unfair” or “not job-related” start floating through the air.

It is not a new phenomenon. Performance appraisal has been around for a long time, as have complaints about its fairness and accuracy. The Chinese philosopher Sin Yu remarked about 1,700 years ago, “The Imperial Rater of Nine Grades seldom rates men according to their merits, but always according to his likes and dislikes.”

Although performance-appraisal methods and systems have evolved since Sin Yu’s time, the tendency to rate others on the basis of personality rather than job performance remains an inherent problem in the performance-appraisal process. Far too often, the performance appraisal becomes a subjective exercise of meaningless personality assessment. Not that personality characteristics are unimportant in job performance – inherent traits and abilities do contribute to success or failure on the job – but this approach does little or nothing to improve job performance. Personality traits, after all, are quite stable aspects of individuals and are, therefore, difficult – if not impossible – to change.

Three performance-appraisal systems in use in various jurisdictions are “combination trait-based and global essay,” “360-degree feedback” and “behavior-based.” I believe, of the three, a behavior-based appraisal is the most effective overall appraisal tool. Therefore, after a brief description of each system, I will give you the basic steps to create your own behavior-based system.

Combination Trait-Based and Global Essay

Combination trait-based and global essay is a common performance-appraisal system. This system requires the rater to rate, on a 1-to-5 or 1-to-7 scale, various personality traits such as “creativity,” “stability,” “motivation,” “alertness” and so forth. The problem is the traits are very broadly defined (if at all) and few (if any) criteria are provided to assist the rater in determining the rating level for each trait. (Try objectively rating “alertness” on a seven-point scale!) In addition, as the trait-based system is often used for all positions within the jurisdiction, some of the traits may be irrelevant to the specific job in question, resulting in the entire process being called into question.

To support trait ratings, this system often requires the rater to provide a narrative opinion (global essay) of the employee’s performance during the appraisal period. The rater is allowed to write

anything to justify the appraisal, even examples of “gut feelings.” The rater – and only the rater – decides what data, if any, is relevant to the appraisal.

A variation of this approach has no essay, just the ratings “outstanding,” “excellent,” “good,” “fair” and “poor.” Again, it is totally up to the rater to determine what data, if any, is relevant to the appraisal.

It is hard to find anything to say in defense of this type of system. Its fairness and accuracy are highly suspect. It is subjective, not anchored in or related to actual work behaviors. It offers no method of enhancing employee growth and development. I believe this type of system is the primary reason many people consider performance appraisals a meaningless, dreaded, once-a-year chore to be endured by management and employees.

360-Degree Feedback

360-degree feedback is used by a growing number of organizations, both private and public. Basically, it is a multi-source appraisal system. It combines self-appraisals, peer appraisals, management appraisals and, often, external third-party appraisals. In theory, this system sounds good: employees not only get to evaluate their own performances, but they also get feedback from their peers, management and external sources.

In reality, 360-degree feedback doesn’t always work. Why? If the system is not carefully structured and monitored, it becomes a sophisticated “popularity contest,” where raters base their ratings on personal like or dislike of the rated person and on subjective opinions of how that person should perform work tasks.

When structured and monitored correctly, 360-degree feedback can be useful for developmental purposes. However, due to a lack of empirical evidence, the jury is still out on its effectiveness as an overall performance-appraisal tool.

Behavior-Based

Behavior-based systems often combine the best features – such as goal-setting procedures, critical-incident methods and behavior-based appraisals – of various appraisal methods. Unlike trait-based systems

that emphasize who a person is, behavior-based systems attempt to discern what a person does (i.e., behavior). When structured correctly, a behavior-based system can be a valuable tool in promoting employee growth and development. In addition, behavior-based systems are usually based on some form of job analysis, so they are more legally defensible than are trait-based systems.

In a behavior-based system, performance appraisal is an ongoing process of daily coaching, counseling and motivating employees to peak performance. Supervisors must recognize and address per-

Rating others based on personality alone does little or nothing to improve job performance.

formance deficiencies as they occur so that at the time of an employee's annual (or semi-annual) performance-appraisal interview, there are no surprises. Both supervisors and employees know exactly what to expect, which makes the entire performance-appraisal interview process less stressful and more rewarding for the employee, the supervisor and, ultimately, the organization.

I know of several innovative agencies and jurisdictions that have developed and implemented their own forms of behavior-based appraisal with great success. As with any worthwhile task, the development process is not easy. It takes time and commitment on the part of management and employees. However, if your goal is to have a performance-appraisal system designed to promote employee growth and development, the benefits more than justify the effort.

Here, in a nutshell, are the basic steps to follow to develop your own behavior-based appraisal system.

1. Conduct a job analysis to determine the essential job tasks and the essential knowledge, skills, abilities and other (personal) characteristics (KSAOs) required to perform the job tasks successfully. Involve all supervisors and employees in the process. Remember, participation leads to ownership and ownership leads to acceptance.

2. Group these job tasks and corresponding KSAOs into general job categories or "key elements" (i.e., "competencies"). For example, the essential job tasks and KSAOs of a telecommunicator position could be grouped into these key elements: oral and written communications, judgment, technical knowledge, calltaking techniques/procedures, dispatch techniques/procedures, interpersonal relationships, quality of work and job-related personal habits.

3. Behaviorally define the performance standard for each key element. Describe the type of behavior one might observe in someone who has mastered this element.

For example, for the key element "judgment," the definition of standard for a telecommunicator position could be "demonstrates the ability to act in a decisive manner, using good judgment (common sense). Decisions are based on sound thought processes and established standard operating procedures. Effectively prioritizes situations and information and makes appropriate decisions based on information received. Recognizes when to make and implement own decisions and when to seek guidance and/or clearance from supervisors. Demonstrates the ability to remember numerous details of recent events and calls for service and apply recalled information appropriately. Makes proper use of available resources to assist in the decision-making process (e.g., maps, SOP, code listings, etc.). Maintains flexibility in adjusting to new or unique situations and/or required procedural changes."

4. Establish a rating scale for evaluating employee performance against the performance standards. Define the types of observed behaviors that would result in obtaining a particular rating level by describing the type of behaviors one might observe in someone whose performance would fall within that rating level.

For example, the behavioral examples for an "unsatisfactory" rating under the key element "judgment" could be "unable to make logical decisions under pressure; makes decisions based on assumptions without listening and comprehending. Is indecisive and unable to reason through a prob-

lem and reach a logical solution. Becomes argumentative when decisions are questioned. Inflexible; unable to adjust to unique or unusual situations and/or required procedural changes. Displays poor memory retention; unable to recall previous solutions to "like" situations and apply them to present situations. Does not make appropriate use of available resources to assist in the decision-making process."

5. Organize the performance standards and rating-scale behavioral examples into a performance standards "packet" and give it to all supervisors and employees. The performance standards give supervisors and employees a clear understanding of what constitutes acceptable performance in a position and should be used by supervisors as a guide for evaluating performance.

6. Create a form to document employee performance in relation to the performance standards. The form should provide for behavioral examples, as well as developmental recommendations (i.e., goals and objectives).

7. Train all supervisors in the purpose and use of the performance standards and the performance-appraisal system. Training should include:

- How to document job-related behaviors,
- How to recognize and commend superior performance,
- How to recognize and address performance deficiencies,
- How to work with employees to develop goals and objectives to build on strengths or improve job performance, and
- How to conduct a performance-appraisal interview that concentrates on observed behaviors instead of judgments regarding an employee's attitude or personality.

8. Continuously review the appraisal process to make sure changing job conditions are reflected in accompanying changes in the performance criteria and standards.

9. Integrate the performance standards into all aspects of center management so the performance standards and appraisal process become part of the culture of your organization.

At this point, you may be thinking, "That all sounds fine and good (if a heckuva lot of work), but why bother? In my jurisdiction we're required to follow and complete a trait-based appraisal."

Well, even in jurisdictions that require all departments to complete an annual trait-based appraisal form, you can develop and implement an effective internal behavior-based appraisal process and use it to enhance the job-relatedness and effectiveness of the annual review.

You can use it to manage and promote continuous employee growth and development. The key is to tie the official trait-based system to the internal behavior-based system. Although this is not easy, you can do it by incorporating each trait category into a key element of each position. Then, when the trait-based form is completed, it will have some relevance to actual job performance.

A behavior-based approach to performance appraisal can help you overcome the negative reputation performance appraisal has so long endured. Practical experience has shown that, if done right, performance appraisal is not a subjective exercise of meaningless personality assessment. It is a meaningful, effective tool for managing employee growth and development. I believe Sin Yu, if alive today, would agree. ■

