



Developing People

Improving Performance

An Essential Guide to Appraisal Interviews

“The overriding objective of appraisals is to improve performance”

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An Essential Guide To Appraisal Interviews

Introduction

There are three parties responsible for an employee's development:

- the employee - who should fully participate in the appraisal process, seek feedback and act upon it
- the manager - whose role is to guide and support, give feedback and help set development objectives which should improve the performance of both the employee and the business
- the business - which should provide a system for employee development, a structure which affords opportunities and a culture which supports individuals' success.

There is no legal requirement to carry out appraisals; however, if done properly, they can be a very effective way of motivating and retaining your employees and improving the ways in which they do their jobs.

Wherever possible, the appraisal should be carried out by the employee's immediate manager as he/she is the person most likely to have the greatest knowledge of the employee's performance and the requirements of his / her role.

The guiding principle is that a good appraisal process is one that engages people and helps them to develop their day-to-day performance. Holistically, the appraisal process should be all about the overall aim, not the process of doing it.

So why are appraisals seen as a chore and a necessary evil and disliked by both managers and employees, alike? Worse still, managers all too often miss-manage the appraisal process and virtually 'guarantee' that they will be unpleasant, adversarial, and virtually worthless.

We accept that appraisals are always going to be a little bit stressful for everyone, but lack of preparation and training compound these errors and guarantee that the objective of appraisals - improving performance, is lost in the 'hot air' of the resultant debate.

This essential-guide to appraisal interviewing covers everything from planning and preparation, objective setting, giving and receiving feedback and communication skills. As well as this there are tips on preparing your appraisees as this is a two-way process after all. Ultimately the guide will help you to ensure that any appraisal you carry out focuses at all times on ***“improving performance.”***

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Common Barriers and Excuses

Below are some of the most common barriers to effective appraisals –

- Too busy managing and fire-fighting to give it full attention
- It's all top-down
- Cancellation / delay of review meetings
- Fear and anxiety on both the appraisees and appraisers
- Avoiding the real issues
- Changing goals throughout the year
- Limited buy-in to the process from appraisees
- Lack of role model behaviours
- Manager doesn't really understand the appraisee's job / contribution

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Appraisals Ten Point Checklist

1. Thorough preparation of both yourself and your staff
2. Create the right atmosphere
3. Work to an agreed and transparent structure
4. Positive reinforcement (constructive criticism)
5. Let the appraisee do most of the talking
6. Encourage appraisee self-assessment and listen actively to what the appraisee says
7. Discuss behaviours, not personality
8. Analyse performance (relevant, quantifiable and honest) and recognise and reinforce achievement
9. Ensure no surprises
10. End positively with agreement to on-going SMART objectives and action plan

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“Fail to Prepare and Prepare to fail”

Clichéd maybe, but failure to prepare for the appraisal by both parties is possibly the single biggest reason for potential failure in the ultimate goal of the appraisal process.

Preparation for the Appraiser

- Review past appraisals (where possible) and any mini discussions since last time
- Review objectives set and progress in each
- Which were met, which were not and why?
- Review improvement / development plan
- Review past training and future needs
- Review career development options
- Prepare your appraisee

Planning and General Preparation

- Timing - when and for how long?
- Notify Appraisee of time and day, well in advance
- Advise Appraisee of **purpose, format, venue** and **preparation** required

Preparation for the appraisee

In order to make this process effective appraisees should also thoroughly prepare. The appraisal should not be something that is “done to” the employee but rather a two way exchange, the chances of this happening are greatly improved when both parties thoroughly prepare.

What should appraisees prepare?

- Their perception of their performance
- Their objectives for the future
- Their training and development needs
- Their key issues
- Their view of your management style

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Setting Objectives

To make the appraisal process a valid exercise and one that ultimately improves performance it is necessary to set on-going objectives.

Although we have all heard of SMART objectives and we all perhaps believe we now what they are exactly it never does any harm to refresh our memories.

The appraisal process will have dramatically improved results if objectives are considered prior to the appraisal meeting.

So just to refresh our memories here is a reminder of SMART.

SMART Objectives

- Specific - relate to specific tasks and activities, not general statements about improvements
- Measurable - it should be possible to assess whether or not they have been achieved
- Attainable - it should be possible for the appraisee to achieve the desired outcome
- Realistic - within the appraisee's capability
- Timed - the next appraisal date, or earlier, should be agreed as the time for reviewing the achievement of the objective.

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EXAMPLES OF S.M.A.R.T OBJECTIVES

Business

- Achieve 3% reduction in inventory levels by end October
- Open 2 new accounts (worth 10k each) by end September
- Have new software programme up and running by end November
- Re-write/update the company presentation by end of quarter 2
- Achieve 2% reduction in days outstanding by 1st December
- Agree objectives for all my team by beginning of quarter 3

Personal

- Lose half a stone in weight by end September
- Learn to speak conversational Spanish by end March
- Have a new patio completed by the first week of September
- Decorate lounge and bedroom by end October
- Save £3,000 for Australian holiday by end December
- Join the golf club and book 6 lessons before 1st October
- Join fitness centre by end of this month!

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Giving and Receiving Feedback

- Be straight with people - don't shadow box
- Convey that it's your personal opinion
- Not the “ultimate gospel”
- Focus on the situation or behaviour, not the personality

Use the C.O.R.B.S. method –

Clear - Don't be vague about the feedback you give otherwise you will not be understood

Owned - The feedback is your perspective
It says as much about you, as the person who receives it
“I find you” not “you are”

Regular - More valuable, if regularly given and it saves grievances being stored up
Try to give feedback as close to the event as possible and early enough for the Appraisee to do something about it
Don't wait for until someone is leaving before you tell them how they could have done their job better! Or how much you have always valued them!

Balanced - If you give only negative or only positive feedback to individuals your view is distorted in some way

Specific - Generalising is hard to learn from
“You are irritating” can only lead to hurt and anger
“It irritates me when you leave the toothpaste top off” gives a much clearer message
The receiver can then take the message on board

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Receiving Feedback

- It gives the Appraisee the chance to voice their opinion
- It gives you the opportunity to reflect on your management style

At the time

- Listen actively to what is said without interrupting, responding or justifying yourself!
- Ask for clarification if necessary
- Encourage the Appraisee to go on giving feedback
- Then respond in a positive, constructive & conversational manner

Afterwards

- Think about what the feedback was saying about your management style
- Consider what you may want to change or modify

Avoid

- Ignoring the feedback either because you don't agree with it or because you don't get on that well with the Appraisee!

Finally

- If possible, check one person's feedback with observations made by others to see whether the feedback has commonality
- Thank the giver

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Performance Appraisals - things to avoid at all costs

In our experience the following things should be avoided at all costs if you want to make the appraisal process work to maximum benefit for both parties –

- Spending more time on historical performance appraisal than future performance planning and communication
- Relative performance comparison with other employees
- Thinking a rating form is an objective, impartial tool
- Believing that managers are in the best position to accurately assess staff (which is not always the case)
- Thinking all employees and all jobs should be assessed in exactly the same way
- Not devoting sufficient time to the meeting
- Postponing or rescheduling the appraisal meeting for anything other than a genuine business emergency

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Asking the right questions

To get the most out of the appraisal sessions ensure that appraisers ask open and probing questions.

Open questions are general rather than specific and they enable appraisees to decide how they should be answered and encourage them to talk more freely.

Examples of open questions include:

- How do you feel things have been going?
- How do you see the job developing?
- How do you feel about that?
- How do you see that developing?
- Tell me, why do you think that happened?

Probing questions dig deeper for more specific information on what happened or why. They can should support for the individual's answer and encourage them to provide more information about their feelings and attitudes. They can also be used to mirror back to the appraisee to check information.

Examples of probing questions include:

- That's very interesting. Tell me more about...?
- To what extent do you think that...?
- Have I got the right impression? Do you mean that...?
- Tell me how you contributed to the success of the project?

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Listening Skills

As mentioned earlier in this guide “let the appraisee do most of the talking”. This requires good listening skills and also requires you to undertake active listening.

The process of active listening is perhaps the single most important skill to master in appraisals and it can be particularly helpful in a conflict situation.

Active listening is a communication technique that requires the listener to understand, interpret, and evaluate what (s)he hears. The ability to listen actively can improve personal relationships through reducing conflicts, strengthening cooperation, and fostering understanding.

When interacting, people often are not listening attentively. They may be distracted, thinking about other things, or thinking about what they are going to say next (the latter case is particularly true in conflict situations or disagreements). Active listening is a structured way of listening and responding to others, focusing attention on the speaker. Suspending one's own frame of reference, suspending judgment and avoiding other internal mental activities are important to fully attend to the speaker

Primary Elements

There are three primary elements that comprise active listening: comprehending, retaining, and responding.

Comprehending

Comprehension is "shared meaning between parties in a communication transaction". This is the first step in the listening process. The first challenge for the listener is accurately identifying speech sounds and understanding and synthesizing these sounds as words. The second challenge is being able to discern breaks between discernable words, or speech segmentation.

Retaining

This is the second step in the listening process. Memory is essential to the listening process because the information we retain when involved in the listening process is how we create meaning from words. We depend on our memory to fill in the blanks when we're listening. Because everyone has different memories, the speaker and the listener may attach different meanings to the same statement.

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Responding

Listening is an interaction between speaker and listener. It adds action to a normally passive process. The speaker looks for verbal and nonverbal responses from the

listener to determine if the message is being listened to. Usually the response is nonverbal because if the response is verbal the speaker/listener roles are reversed so the listener becomes the speaker and is no longer listening. Based on the response the speaker should either adjust or continue with his/her communication style.

Tactics

It is important for a listener to observe the speaker's behavior and body language. Having the ability to interpret a person's body language lets the listener develop a more accurate understanding of the speaker's message. When the listener does not respond to the speaker's nonverbal language, (s)he engages in a content-only response which ignores the emotions that guide the message. Having heard, the listener may then paraphrase the speaker's words. It is important to note that the listener is not necessarily agreeing with the speaker—simply stating what was said.

In emotionally charged communications, the listener may listen for feelings. Thus, rather than merely repeating what the speaker has said, the active listener might describe the underlying emotion ("You seem to feel angry," or "You seem to feel frustrated, is that because ... ?").

Individuals in conflict often contradict each other. This has the effect of denying the validity of the other person's position. Ambushing occurs when we listen to someone else's argument for its weaknesses and ignore its strengths. The purpose is to attack the speaker's position and support your own. This may include a distortion of the speaker's argument to gain a competitive advantage. Either party may react defensively, and they may lash out or withdraw. On the other hand, if one finds that the other party understands, an atmosphere of cooperation can be created. This increases the possibility of collaborating and resolving the conflict.

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Barriers to active listening

All elements of communication, including listening, may be affected by barriers that can impede the flow of conversation. Such barriers include distractions, trigger words, vocabulary, and limited attention span.

Listening barriers may be psychological (e.g. emotions) or physical (e.g. noise and visual distraction). Cultural differences including speakers' accents, vocabulary, and misunderstandings due to cultural assumptions often obstruct the listening process.

Frequently, the listener's personal interpretations, attitudes, biases, and prejudices lead to ineffective communication.

Overcoming listening barriers

To use the active listening technique to improve interpersonal communication, one puts personal emotions aside during the conversation, asks questions and paraphrases back to the speaker to clarify understanding, and one also tries to overcome all types of environment distractions. Don't judge or argue prematurely. Furthermore, the listener considers the speaker's background, both cultural and personal, to benefit as much as possible from the communication process. Eye contact and appropriate body languages are also helpful. It is important to focus on what the speaker is saying; at times you might come across certain key words which will certainly help you understand the speaker. The stress and intonation will also keep you active and away from distractions. Taking notes on the message will aid in retention.

Misconceptions about Listening

There are several misconceptions about listening. The first of these is listening and hearing are the same thing. Hearing is the physiological process of registering sound waves as they hit the eardrum. We have no control over what we hear. The sounds we hear have no meaning until we give them their meaning in context. Listening on the other hand is an active process that constructs meaning from both verbal and nonverbal messages. It involves a lot of interpretation by the listener to reconstruct a message that is like the one that the speaker intended to send. The second is that listening is a natural process. However, we have been hearing since birth, not listening. Listening is a skill that is acquired over a lifetime. The third misconception is listening requires no effort. This is untrue because the more you practice listening the better you get at it and the three steps that comprise it.

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Final Checklist

Remember the overriding objective of appraisals is to *“improve performance.”*

In Summary

1. Plan and prepare thoroughly
2. Prepare your appraisee as this is a two way process
3. Set objectives prior to the appraisal – appraising manager and appraisee
4. Use the CORBS method to give feedback
5. Plan your questions before the appraisal
6. Practice Active Listening

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Contact Us

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Delegates

“This course has given me a refreshing approach to the appraisal process, which will help me to conduct the process in a more objective way with increased confidence. The trainer was engaging throughout.”

“This was an extremely helpful course. As a first time appraiser I will be implementing a lot of the advice and techniques given today.”

“An extremely useful and relevant course. As a result of attending this training, I feel more confident to carry out the appraisal process more effectively.”

“An excellent day – thoroughly relevant, professional and polished.”

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