

# Performance Appraisal

## Like a Trip to the Dentist

Pauline had trouble falling asleep that night. She kept tossing and turning as her thoughts about performance appraisals churned around in her head.

*Might as well get up and make some notes,* she thought as she threw the bed covers aside.

She turned on the light in her home office and booted up her laptop. The first words she entered were "Annual PAs: About as much fun as a trip to the dentist."

*This could help both me and the company,* she thought as she began to collect and enter her ideas. It was clear to her that there were several reasons for her disdain of annual performance appraisals.

First, they were time consuming. Pauline resented all the time she spent filling out forms. Each form asked for a lot of repetitive information that she had to copy laboriously from the previous year's form, followed by forty performance items she had to evaluate.

The meetings themselves were time consuming, too. She had to sit down with each employee for a half hour, an hour, or more and talk with him or her. The meetings seemed to go on forever and often ended on a sour note, even though that was never her intention. It somehow just "happened."

Second, she was concerned about the use of arbitrary numbers. Each section involved rating her people on a one to five scale. It was very difficult to justify giving one person a four and another a five. What was the behavioral difference between a four and a five? How could she be impartial and objective using numbers? While she could distinguish between the best and worst of her people, most were in the mushy middle. So she tended to give all of her folks high numbers because she didn't want to prevent any of them from getting their full—if rather meager—bonuses at the end of the year.

Another problem was that performance appraisals usually involved coordination with the human resources department. These people, after all, were the custodians of the performance appraisal process. They were cordial and helpful enough, but HR didn't understand the day-to-day realities of line managers. They wanted the forms back by a certain date regardless of the work pressures Pauline confronted. It was as if those blasted pieces of paper were more important than the customers in the field. Pauline was incensed that a department to which she did not report was ordering her to do something arbitrary at best—and totally at its convenience.

It was clear to Pauline that her direct supervisor, Andy, viewed performance appraisals as a low priority. After all, he seldom completed his appraisals within the two-month time frame set by the HR department. In fact, Pauline had never received her own performance appraisal anywhere near the deadline. And when she met with Andy to discuss her appraisal, she learned very little because, clearly, he hadn't taken the time to prepare for the meeting.

Due to his low opinion of the process, she received little support in terms of the reviews she conducted. In all of the years she had worked with Andy, he had not once raised the issue of

how well she was appraising her people's performance. Certainly it was not something evaluated or even mentioned in his appraisal of her performance.

Pauline wondered how Andy would respond if she said, "Sorry, I can't meet your production quota this week because I'm taking the time to do effective and timely performance appraisals with my staff."

*His response would be as predictable as the weather in Portland*, she thought. "Have you lost your mind? You can fill out those appraisal papers anytime. We have customer orders to fill." It turned out that there were always customer orders to fill, so performance appraisals routinely slipped to the bottom of the priority list. When most managers finally got around to preparing appraisals, they didn't devote the time and attention needed to do them well because HR needed them yesterday.

The forms were also devilishly annoying to fill out because they required subjective as well as objective analysis. As hard as the numbers were to assign, at least they were numbers.

Pauline could then use those numbers to justify her discussion with an employee: "Right now you are a three, perhaps you can work harder this year and move to a four." But the form also had space to write a qualitative assessment of the employee.

Pauline was especially uncomfortable with this aspect. She believed that a manager's job was to be objective. Any narrative she wrote about one of her people's performance ran the risk of subjectivity and bias. If she prided herself on anything, it was her fairness and unbiased approach toward all of her people. It occurred to her that perhaps the performance appraisal system could be improved by redesigning the forms to eliminate the request for subjective assessments.

The fact that performance appraisals took place only once a year was a big problem. By the time Pauline completed the forms and shared them with her employees, much of the content was ancient history.

But to Pauline, one of the most frustrating aspects of the current performance appraisal process was that it did not have a clearly established purpose in Pauline's company. How were those numbers and subjective statements actually used? Pauline knew that they impacted bonuses and that was why she tended to rate everyone positively. After all, she didn't have any really *bad* people. Even the poorest performer among them deserved more than the meager bonus offered by the company.

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Even her best people had occasional bad months. Yet when that did happen, she generally did not reflect that fact in their performance appraisals. She was afraid that this might stigmatize the work records of her people and limit their consideration for future promotions. From a selfish standpoint, of course, Pauline liked to do what she could to retain her best people. But Pauline genuinely cared about the career development of her staff and wanted to help them get ahead in the company. By overlooking her people's occasional poor performances, Pauline believed she was serving their best interests in the long run.

Of course, the number one problem with performance appraisals was that they often involved the delivery of bad news. Even though she rated most people high, she still felt obliged to raise concerns with her people during a performance appraisal

Performance appraisals may be feared as bearers of bad news.

meeting. This was the one structured opportunity she had in which to do this. She used the occasion to broach issues that had not been discussed during the year. Because both she and her people knew that this was going to happen, the meetings usually got off to an uncomfortable start and remained uncomfortable throughout.

Pauline looked at the list she had entered in her computer—a list she felt summarized the problem with performance appraisals fairly well.

*Okay, Pauline thought. Now that I know what I don't like about appraisals, who's going to care?*

With that, Pauline put her computer to “sleep” and pushed her unpleasant thoughts about performance appraisals to the back of her mind. She never bothered to print out her thoughts. In fact, she simply forgot about them.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- PAs are time consuming.
- They use arbitrary numbers.
- HR doesn't understand what pressures managers face.
- PAs are a low priority to management.
- Management offers little support for the process.
- PAs are subjective as well as objective.
- They contain ancient history.
- They have no clearly established purpose.
- They might stigmatize work records.
- They deliver bad news.