

Evaluate This!

Whether you are about to be evaluated or perform an evaluation yourself, chances are the prospect is one approached with resignation, a degree of discomfort, or in some extreme cases, even dread. If evaluations are intended to benefit both the company and the employee involved then why does this less than enthusiastic attitude towards them persist?

Part of the problem may lie in the way they are implemented and approached. Too many companies, both large and small, perceive evaluations as perhaps a politically correct bureaucratic process to be tolerated; an assumption is made that they are necessary, with little thought given as to why they are. Like an exercise regimen that we dutifully, yet grudgingly follow without considering the potential benefits or hazards, a haphazard evaluation process can in fact do more harm than good. For evaluations to be effective they must be approached with sincerity and goodwill, otherwise you would be better served not to perform them at all.

For the process to be a fruitful one, guidelines must be in place. What message are we trying to convey to the employee? What is it we hope to achieve? This process can be simplified if we think of the position as being comprised of two key components: standards and expectations.

Of the two, standards are the easier to communicate and comprehend. Any position entails duties that require certain minimum standards be met, common to all employees holding the position, and in all likelihood these standards were clearly outlined at the time of hiring (if not, they should have been). For example, a standard for a customer service position may be that the representative remains courteous to clients at all times. If this standard is not being met then it should be addressed at the time the infraction occurs and as such will hardly come as a shock to the employee if it is mentioned during the appraisal. Praise and criticism should be given equal consideration and weight and all criticism should be presented with an opportunity for the employee to give their views as well as open a dialogue on how the employee may improve performance in the area being critiqued.

Expectations (or goals) are more complex in that they are custom tailored to the employee based on a variety of factors that may include prior experience, education, skills, potential, and often the changing career desires of the employees' themselves. As such, greater consideration must be given to the employees' strengths and weaknesses and individual personality traits. Expectations more frequently require reevaluation and are more long-term in nature.

If properly conducted, there should actually be no surprises to any of the parties involved in the evaluation process. In fact, performance appraisals should be seen as part of an ongoing practice, a periodic “summing up” of feedback that is regularly given. Communication is key to any successful organization. Regular criticism and praise of an employees’ performance should be expressed throughout the year, as warranted. If it is not, you are already creating potential problems that no evaluation practice can correct and in fact will probably exacerbate. For example, if employee X, who has received no negative feedback (if in fact any feedback) over a given time period were suddenly hit with an evaluation that suggested his work was subpar, he or she might understandably be not only surprised, but outraged as well. Conversely if employee Y, who continually performs at sub-standard levels, does not receive constructive criticism during the evaluation, then he or she may understandably see no need to strive for improvement.

Employees should be given the opportunity to express their views during the process (without fear of reprisal), not only of their rating, but also of their superiors and how management practices impact their performance. Sincere consideration of these views should be given by management and where warranted they should reevaluate the appraisal accordingly.

Management must resist the tendency to selectively appraise. In other words, consideration of overall performance must be taken into account. A particular incident may stick out in the appraisers mind, say for example, an employee fails to show up for work three days in a row without calling in to explain due to a personal crises. While this is of course a serious infraction that needs to be addressed, if it is an isolated occurrence and considered out of character on an otherwise relatively unblemished record, then it should not color the overall appraisal.

Evaluations should not be used as a justification for companies to meet their bottom line with regard to salary. For obvious practical reasons in many companies, performance appraisals and raises occur at the same time. While salary increases will of course be influenced by performance evaluations, they should remain distinct entities in the mind of the appraiser. Too often companies yield to the temptation, deliberately or not, to cite performance appraisals as the overriding determination of salary and therefore adjust the appraisal to meet their budgetary constraints. Employees who are otherwise deserving of high evaluations are reduced to average ones, average employees are reduced to below average, and so on. If the reason for salary determination is based on some other reason than performance, such as budgetary constraints, or perhaps the company places a ceiling value on the duties being performed, than it should be presented as such. Most workers will more likely favorably respond to being told that while their performance warrants increase it simply cannot be afforded at this time than they would having an inaccurate appraisal being set forth or feeling that they must reach unattainable performance levels to warrant a raise. If your employees do not regard the process as credible, than the whole process itself becomes redundant, a

waste of time and money, and probably harmful to the company in terms of its negative impact on employee moral.

Employees being appraised must of course do their part to ensure that the process is a useful one. Honest and realistic self-appraisal is required, as well as an appreciation of the companies perspective. A non-combative attitude and lack of defensiveness with regards to valid criticism is key in order for the employee to benefit from the process. If an employee is overly sensitive to criticism than this issue should first be addressed and ideally resolved by the employer.

The details and ramifications of any effective evaluation process are varied and complex and would require more space and elaboration than any single article could convey. However below you'll find some of the more salient points to consider with regards to your companies future evaluations.

- Evaluations should be held at regular periodic intervals as deemed necessary.
- A friendly, open atmosphere should prevail. Remember this is an opportunity to communicate for both parties. The less tension involved the better.
- Whenever possible, choose a time that is convenient to the employee. The process is far less likely to be met enthusiastically if it occurs at a stressful time in the workers' day (i.e. under a deadline, etc.).
- Prepare for the evaluation in advance. However use unscripted, naturalistic language that clearly expresses what you wish to convey. Avoid ambiguous statements.
- Negative criticism should always be tempered with sincere, friendly advice on how the employee can improve. The employee must be made to feel that you are on their side and truly wish the best for them. Otherwise, any criticism will likely only serve to demoralize them.
- Invite feedback and give serious consideration to what the employee has to say. While you may have carefully prepared for the evaluation and feel your assessment is accurate, be willing to modify your appraisal in light of new information. Remember no evaluation is etched in stone.

Above all, be fair and honest. If both these criteria are adhered to, it is likely your evaluation will prove beneficial and rewarding to all involved.