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THE SUCCESSFUL NEW MANAGER

Joseph T. Straub

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CONTENTS

<u>ix</u>	PREFACE
<u>1</u>	CHAPTER 1 Needed: A New Perspective
<u>9</u>	CHAPTER 2 Managing Your Time
<u>16</u>	CHAPTER 3 Setting Goals and Planning
<u>24</u>	CHAPTER 4 Leading Your People
<u>34</u>	CHAPTER 5 Team Building
<u>42</u>	CHAPTER 6 Making Effective Decisions
<u>51</u>	CHAPTER 7 Delegating Authority
<u>61</u>	CHAPTER 8 Hiring and Orienting New Employees
<u>71</u>	CHAPTER 9 Motivating People to Do Their Best
<u>80</u>	CHAPTER 10 <i>Attached</i> Appraising Performance
<u>89</u>	CHAPTER 11 Discipline and Termination
<u>102</u>	CHAPTER 12 Communicating for Success
<u>116</u>	ANSWER KEY FOR REVIEW-AND-REFLEC ACTIVITIES

CHAPTER 10

APPRAISING PERFORMANCE

Employees need and usually want feedback about the quality of their work. Your ability to evaluate their performance objectively and constructively has a major impact on their success as well as yours.

FOUNDATION FOR APPRAISAL

If your company has a formal appraisal program, you must, of course, follow its guidelines in terms of timing (e.g., annual, semiannual, quarterly evaluations), rating system (e.g., numerical ratings or such designations as excellent, good, satisfactory, needs improvement), and the relationship of the evaluation to pay, promotion, training, and disciplinary decisions.

Whatever your company policies require, the following suggestions can make your appraisal process more effective.

Quantify Performance Goals If Possible

Quantified goals are objective goals; there is little debate about whether employees reached them—for example:

- “I plan to decrease customer complaints by at least 10 percent in the hardware department this year.”
- “I’m going to cut scrap and rework by 15 percent this quarter.”
- “I’m going to increase the number of claims processed by a minimum of 8 percent per month.”

Expressing goals numerically instead of in vague or subjective terms helps to prevent positive or negative bias on your part and enables employees to focus their efforts and assess their own progress clearly and precisely.

Should You Keep a Diary?

Some managers use a diary to record significant incidents and specific examples of employees' performance that might otherwise slip their minds from one work period to the next. A record ensures that you'll collect information throughout the entire work period and produce a more complete and valid evaluation than if you relied on memory alone. Without a comprehensive record, your ratings may be slanted toward employees' most recent performance. (Workers, of course, may try to cash in on that oversight by suddenly shaping up several weeks before their regular evaluation is due.) A diary also accumulates most of the information you'll need to prepare evaluations in one place so you won't have to dig through files and round up material from several sources.

If you decide to keep a diary, a few words of caution are in order:

- Keep it in a safe location, preferably off the premises. If the record is saved on a computer disk, lock the file with a code that snoopers can't crack by trial and error. Don't use codes that others might figure out, such as your license tag or house number.
- Make sure to record positive information. If you don't make a conscious effort to include some "attaboys," your diary may deteriorate into a hit list of criticisms and mistakes.
- Purge older information once it becomes irrelevant so it won't affect your judgment about more recent performance.

Consider Self-Evaluation

Some managers ask employees to evaluate themselves as a preface to the formal review. In addition to being a construc-

tive experience, this practice broadens the base of information you can use to prepare the official evaluation.

When subordinates evaluate themselves, they'll think critically about their progress and achievements. In addition, they're required to view their performance from your perspective as well as their own. Self-evaluation gives them an opportunity to inform you of accomplishments, recognition, and problems you might be unaware of.

As far as you're concerned, self-evaluation offers several benefits:

- It creates a new channel of communication.
- You come across as a participative manager who both encourages and expects employees to take an active role in the appraisal process.
- Self-evaluation helps you confirm or modify your opinions of your people's performance in the light of information provided by them.

Subordinates may abuse or be misled by a self-evaluation policy, however, unless you set at least two ground rules:

1. Require them to supply quantified (or at least verifiable) support for their own ratings. If you don't, some employees may give themselves a much higher rating than they really deserve. Refuse to accept what they say about themselves at face value. If they can't justify their own ratings, you'll be obliged to lower their inflated opinions with evidence of your own.
2. Clarify that this opportunity is a privilege, not a right. Their self-evaluation is just one of the sources you may use to make the formal appraisal more thorough and accurate.

Nip Pending Problems in the Bud

One of the best ways to help your staff earn justifiably high performance reviews is to tell them about unacceptable behavior or performance without delay. This gives them the

opportunity to correct problems before they end up on the record. For example, a worker who starts returning late from lunch regularly or handing in sloppy work should be informed of the problem and its potential impact on the annual review. This practice is better than letting the situation drag on for several months, dropping the bomb at evaluation time, and having the upset person ask, "Why didn't you mention this sooner?"

PITFALLS OF PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

Performance appraisals are subject to several hazards, but you can navigate around them successfully once you know what they are.

- *The halo effect and negative impressions.* In performance appraisals, as in hiring, managers have to guard against forming positive or negative opinions based on personality traits or personal appearance. *Concentrate on evaluating how well the employee met clear-cut performance goals.* That's the key issue here.

- *Leniency.* Some managers tend to be permissive because they feel awkward or embarrassed about discussing performance deficiencies with workers. Although these feelings are understandable, your responsibility to level with substandard performers and counsel them about improving comes with the management territory.

Sooner or later, everyone suffers from a lenient appraisal. The organization doesn't get a fair return on its investment in these low performers. Employees, who may know full well that they're not working up to par, can lose respect for a boss who seems to be too wimpy to confront them. Employees also may get a false sense of security. Imagine their shock the first time they're rated by an up-front manager who knows they're slacking off and tells them so.

- *Central tendency.* This pitfall, a second cousin of leniency, is the inclination to rate everyone's performance as

acceptable. Central tendency does an injustice to outstanding performers, however, because they're denied the recognition and praise they deserve. At the same time, their underachieving coworkers are allowed to slide by with acceptable ratings.

- *Focus on recent behavior.* Recent behavior is easiest to recall, but it tells only part of the story. Your evaluation should assess performance for the entire period of time since the last rating, not just recent events or achievements.

THE EVALUATION CONFERENCE

Although some managers consider evaluation interviews a necessary evil, the information exchanged during this discussion can be extremely important to your employees. Most of us are anxious to know how our boss thinks we're doing, so give this meeting the respect and effort it deserves.

Planning the Conference

Set a mutually convenient date and time. Avoid scheduling the meeting on a birthday, wedding anniversary, Friday, or just before or after the worker's vacation. This gives too much time for anxiety to build. People are in a better position to address their shortcomings when they know they can attack them first thing in the morning. Then tell the employee what you're going to discuss so he or she arrives emotionally prepared.

Review the person's job description and records (including the diary and self-evaluation material, if used). Then reflect on the employee's duties and responsibilities, major projects completed or pending, agreed-upon goals for the past work period, training, experience, special skills, and such qualities as job knowledge, overall work quality, planning and organizing skill, initiative, ability to work well with colleagues, problem-solving ability, and other performance-based attributes.

To ensure privacy during your conference, hold all telephone calls or retreat to a quiet location where the two of you

won't be interrupted. Don't postpone or reschedule a conference unless it's absolutely necessary. Putting it off diminishes its importance and frustrates employees who naturally want to get it over with.

Honing Your Techniques

Some managers take a "criticism sandwich" approach: opening the interview by praising outstanding accomplishments and qualities, discussing areas that need improvement and precise, tangible actions that the employee can take to correct or elevate performance in those areas, and closing the meeting with a restatement of strong points. Bracketing problems or weak spots with positive feedback helps prevent employees from becoming overwhelmed by their deficiencies and blowing them out of proportion.

It's vital to criticize constructively. After pointing out areas where employees fell short of their goals or need to improve, you must tell them what specifically they can do to resolve or eliminate the difficulty. Avoid vague and subjective phrases like "You seem," "It appears," or "I believe" and referring to the person's "attitude" (which cannot be quantified or nailed down). Support your evaluation by citing incidents, dates, times, and objective evidence of both strong and weak performance.

Effective performance appraisers are coaches, counselors, and collaborators. They're committed to helping people elevate their performance and reach their true potential in the future.

Never compare peers with each other. Comparing two subordinates by name ("You should try to be more like Smedley; she has excellent initiative and is the best performer in your group") can cause trouble. Singling out one person as a role model for the rest creates resentment toward the high achiever. Instead, concentrate on how well the person you're evaluating met performance goals that were established at the beginning of the work period.

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BEYOND APPRAISAL

Performance appraisals are guidelines to success. They confirm strengths, reveal shortcomings, and highlight employees' needs for additional experience and training.

No evaluation is complete without guidance and direction that will help employees strengthen notable weaknesses and pursue excellence in areas they are strong in. A complete appraisal should include a program of personal development activities, created and agreed upon by both you and your employee, that will correct weaknesses and develop or enhance future performance. These activities may include, for example, registering workers in appropriate in-house courses or seminars and encouraging them to enroll in programs offered by the public school system, trade schools, and community colleges. The effort you invest in developing outstanding subordinates will pay dividends in the performance of your overall department and add to the reputation and success of everyone involved.

Judge a tree from its fruit; not from the leaves.

—EURIPIDES

REVIEW AND REFLECT

How Do You Rate?

Rate each of the following factors. Make a special note of those that you do not have or believe you should obtain or improve. Be honest!

EVALUATING EMPLOYEES' PERFORMANCE		Need to Improve or Obtain
	Yes	No
a. I have a job description for each position that reports to me.	_____	_____

Need to Improve or Obtain

Yes

No

- b. I can get quantified or verifiable goals for each position. _____
- c. I have records that provide evidence of each person's accomplishments. _____
- d. I have access to records that help me decide what type of training and development activities would be appropriate for each person. _____
- e. I believe I should create a performance diary for the people who report to me. _____
- f. Self-evaluation would be useful and appropriate for gathering information on my employees' performance. _____
- g. I don't warn employees about their unacceptable behavior or performance as promptly or frankly as I should. _____
- h. I tend to draw unjustified opinions about my staff based on their personal appearance and/or personalities. _____
- i. I'm more concerned about my staff's liking me than I am about informing them of areas where they need to improve. _____
- j. I tend to evaluate my employees over the entire work period instead of the past few weeks or months. _____

(continues)

	Yes	No	Need to Improve or Obtain
k. I'm well informed about the resources my organization and the community offer to help employees correct and improve performance deficiencies.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
l. I encourage employees to obtain the training they need to correct performance problems and develop their full potential.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

What's Next?

Describe specific actions you can take to obtain missing information noted in How Do You Rate? or to develop or improve the traits and qualities that will enable you to appraise your employees' performance effectively.

IMPROVING MY EVALUATION TECHNIQUES
