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Perspectives on “Performance” “Management” A View from the HR Manager’s Seat

The quotation marks in the title reflect two of my firmest convictions: No matter how far-reaching my authority or how vast my leadership accountability¹, I can manage the performance of only one person – me. It follows that not one of us can change or improve the skill, knowledge, attitude, competence or ambition of any other of us. Of course, given our roles as Human Resource professionals, we are responsible for designing and delivering the opportunities, resources, and tools that will enable our employees to make those improvements for themselves.

Second, what I do at work, what each of us does in our respective positions, is not “performance,” but some combination of thought, reflection, action, application of experience, and yes, even educated guessing that we label “work.” On this premise, what we can do with another’s “performance” is observe it, report on it, consult and advise about it, and decide whether it meets the needs of the department, school, hospital, team, or work group by any other name.

When I think about the process of providing employee feedback about work in terms of “performance management,” it seems rather negative. In this context, it might be more appropriately defined as the first step toward progressive discipline. The HR director wants to ensure it is documented so the attorneys have a paper trail, so that the much feared but rarely filed lawsuit has less chance of success.

Yet, when our organizations engage in satisfaction surveys, employee engagement assessments, and the like, there is an almost universal craving for feedback. It is an endearing human trait that nearly every employee, even those skating on oh-so-thin-ice, wants to be told how they’re doing.

Most people act in ways that I believe to be reflective of another universal human trait -- we are wired to want to succeed, and we act positively on that drive. Have you ever heard anyone say, “I think I’ll go out and be mediocre today?” “Perhaps I can get away with doing things half-right this week.” In my experience, people want to excel. We can attribute this to pride, to personal ethos, to intrinsic or acquired values, or even to ego. But except for some rare exceptions, it seems to be an almost universal yearning. Because of it, we want (some would argue that we need) to be recognized by others for success. We want to know that someone knows how difficult an accomplished task was, how much effort, training, thinking, mental acuity, or perseverance was required of us to get it done.

Conversely, it is extremely difficult to hear that our efforts fall short in some fundamental way. That is the principal, and perhaps the only true reason why those in supervisory roles find honest

¹ The scope (breadth and depth) of responsibility that puts a leader “on the hook: for success and/or achievement of goals or objectives.

evaluation of a negative nature so difficult to discuss. And why it is avoided, always at significant organizational cost.

I read with interest Peter Bregman's² blog of January 19 on the Harvard Business Review web site. He says, "*Effective feedback is clear and specific. Silence is ambiguous and generic. It could mean anything. We don't know why the other person is silentand we inevitably go straight to our biggest insecurities.*"

"Why do we go to our insecurities? Because we know that people tend to shy away from communicating negative messages. If someone hasn't called us, we think to ourselves, it must be that she doesn't want to communicate something negative to us. Or she simply wants us to stop bothering her and go away.

So, when we don't get a response from someone, we imagine one, and it sounds something like this: 'Terrible job you did the other day. And, oh, by the way, I don't like you very much.' Which, of course, is not usually what the other person wants to communicate."

So, we have designed and re-designed performance management systems. In most of our organizations, it falls to the HR office to promote and manage and track them.

In 2002, Jim Laumeyer, Chair of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) National Employee and Labor Relations Committee, wrote a White Paper for SHRM.³ He compares employee feedback systems that he labels "performance appraisal" and "continuous feedback", and his brief article clearly defines the two.

He describes performance appraisal in terms of implementing regularly scheduled and somewhat formulaic processes of documented conversations with employees. In a nutshell, Laumeyer argues that "Performance appraisal systems have few true supporters. Employers have often indicated informally a low level of satisfaction; supervisors often must be coerced to comply. Employees often feel short-changed or treated unfairly." More recent conversations with HR leaders and senior administrators indicate that frequently these statements still hold true.

In September, a group of Principal Business Officers got together to listen to and discuss ideas about performance management. Of particular concern was the interaction – or lack thereof – between faculty managers and other faculty or staff who report to them.

We talked about the goals of performance management systems, and about the impact of those systems on the organization, the individual, and productivity in general. One exercise brought 16 participants to flip charts to document for the group just why they supported performance management, and whether or not they thought it was working.

² Peter Bregman is CEO of Bregman Partners, Inc., a management consulting firm, and author of the book, [Point B – A Short Guide to Leading a Big Change](#) (Space for Change, New York, 2007).

³ SHRM.org archives, September 2002

The responses to the question, “Why” brought precisely the answers we can all recite without much concentrated effort. Increasing productivity, encouraging excellence, establishing goals, documenting problems, and fostering satisfaction were the prominent themes.

Interestingly, although most participants in the afternoon’s session reported that they did have systems in place, when the 16 “scribes” were asked whether the “Why?” goals were being met, there was but one unequivocal “yes”. There were 6 resounding “No”s, and 9 who just weren’t sure.

The recommendation made by Laumeyer and heartily endorsed by many of us is that a system of continuous feedback is far more constructive and timely. Most of us would love to implement a system of feedback that is given on the spot and in the moment. There is no question that it would provide immediate information to employees, and allow pertinent and current attention to problems as they occur. But given the constraints of staffing, administrative burdens, research, and clinical productivity demands, there simply are not sufficient resources to provide this kind of service.

All this begs the question: Are we wasting our time on systems that seem to be delivering little or less impact relative to the effort it takes to design, maintain, manage and evaluate them? Everyone agrees that having some dialog or conversation between manager and “managee” is crucial. We seem to have no lack of process and no shortage of systems yet we are still not sure they work, or uncertain about the reasons why/why not.

We would like to hear from you about what you are doing relative to this process, particularly now that so many of our organizations have reduced staff, cut back on salary, bonus and perquisite benefits, and seen the impact of other financial actions required of us since the fall of 2008.

Do you have a system that supervisors support? Is there senior level support and promotion for the process? Have you seen positive results? Please share your experiences with us either through the HR list serve, or by contacting me directly.

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