

# Problems In Appraisal Programs

## Common Sense Plays A Big Role In Manager Counseling

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Appraisal and counseling of managers is an area of management development in which almost every company of any size is engaged. The company without an appraisal and counseling program is just not keeping up with the "Industrial Joneses." However, are these programs doing any good? Or are they a waste of time, effort and money? Managers all over industry at this very moment are caught up in this process against their will and are asking themselves these same questions. At this instant there are hundreds, if not thousands, of unhappy, disgruntled and angry people who have just been told by the boss what's wrong with them and how to correct it. Usually this involves changing one's personality and behavior to conform to the ideas of the boss concerning leadership. Of course a leader

is anyone with all the fine qualities which the boss sees in himself.

### **How Problems Develop**

How did we get into this situation? There are many answers to this question. The need for developing competent managers is certainly a great one. It has been a neglected activity. Under pressure many companies have initiated appraisal programs without proper preparation and without knowledge of the development principles involved. As a result they have gone into varied and strange bypaths in an effort to find a quick, easy solution to their problems. Sometimes programs have been sold by management consultants as a quick cure for ills caused by management's neglect

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of its training responsibilities. Usually these have been sold more successfully if the procedure and the forms were impressively complex. Occasionally departures from sound procedure and practice have been made by some manager relatively high in the hierarchy who because he is a successful manager is also an expert in what he probably refers to as "human engineering." Other managers naturally have followed the boss's example.

The sad part of this whole situation is that appraisal programs, properly carried out, really are sound, practical means for developing competent managers. Another unhappy facet to the situation is that the principles and requirements for a good appraisal program are well known and have been presented many times in seminars, books and various publications. The plain fact is that they are ignored by managers, personnel people, and training specialists who do not want to take the time and effort to learn them, and by careful analysis and study apply them to the needs of their own organization. At the risk of repeating what has been said or written many times, I should like to examine some of the principles and requirements of a good appraisal and counseling program. I should at the same time like to point out mistakes that are often made and suggest means for keeping the program headed in the right direction.

One of the reasons for failure of many appraisal programs is that the managers involved have no real idea of its purpose. No clearly defined objective has been determined. Or if it has, little effort has been made to assure that

everyone who will participate knows what he is trying to achieve. Another difficulty is that companies sometimes expect one procedure to accomplish every purpose for which an appraisal program may be used: management inventory, salary administration, training needs, individual development, or what have you. One procedure, at least without modification, cannot be used for every purpose.

In recent years appraisals and interviews have been used more and more as a management development tool. Also that is the use where most of the difficulties seem to be and where most of the crimes against the personality of the individual have been committed. Therefore, to simplify our task we shall limit our discussion to problems of an appraisal and counseling program whose objective is management development. To further simplify let us divide the problem into two broad areas: appraisals and the interview.

### ***Fairness and Objectivity***

Appraisals first. The big problem here, at least in the minds of the people concerned, is to be fair and objective. And we have gone to great extremes in our attempts to achieve these worthy ends. We have developed long, tedious, complicated rating forms which purport to do the job. Some of these even use a weighted scale which is supposed to place everyone in a nice, numbered slot so far as managerial ability or performance is concerned. Inasmuch as managers are accustomed to appraising and judging everything else on a quantita-

tive basis this has great appeal for some people. We use various methods such as group appraisal, forced choice, critical incident, field review and many others. I doubt that we are accomplishing very much by any of them except to complicate an already difficult problem. In the first place is it possible to be objective? Is it even necessary? Human beings are not even objective about things, let alone other people. The only person you or I can be objective about is someone we don't know. And how do you rate someone you don't know? We can work toward and achieve a certain degree of fairness. We can do this by constant vigilance against our own biases, by assuming that the manager being rated is interested in the job and wants to do it well, and by rating people on job performance rather than a list of personality traits.

It is a bewildering paradox that the manager who continually decries the lack of objective standards against which to measure people will go right along with a list of personality traits, provided it is long enough and there are at least ten gradations on the scale for each trait. Of course he does this every day. We continually judge people in this manner, our friends, our associates and our political leaders. But is such an appraisal valid? I believe it is not. There are at least a thousand different terms which can be used to describe an individual's personality. I defy anyone to show that they can be defined, explained, or measured by the usual manager in industry. Besides, contrary to popular belief, no one trait or group of traits has been discovered to account for managerial success. What we should be

interested in is job performance. And unless we can definitely show that a particular trait is preventing a man from achieving expected results in his job we should not overly concern ourselves with his personality.

As I go over a number of rating forms in current use by various companies and governmental agencies, some of the traits which occur in almost all of them are initiative, judgment, vision and aggressiveness. Would not these terms have different meanings and connotations under different circumstances and for different people? For example, initiative in one case might be considered presumption in another. In one situation it might be synonymous with constructive thinking, or in another taking action without proper authority.

What is judgment? Is it making the right decision at the right time? And what are right decisions? Those which the boss would have made? And how does the boss, unaided by hindsight, know what he would have done?

What is vision? Is it foresight and imagination or is it impractical dreaming? How do you measure it? Where does imagination become impractical dreaming?

Might not an aggressive person in some situations be merely obnoxious? Is the aggressive person one who persists until the job is done? Or is he the assertive, officious guy who must always have his own way?

Now I must admit that all these terms are defined in the rating forms where they are used, but the definitions are as subject to different interpretations as are the terms. And how do you know how much of each a particular indi-

vidual has? More will be said of this problem when we get to the counseling interview.

One of the most popular means presently in vogue for achieving objectivity and fairness is group appraisal. I have a few words for this too. I think it is costly, slow, and wasteful and does not make the appraisal any more objective. At best it is only a compromise of opinions. If you are appraising in terms of personality traits, all you have are more interpretations of the terms used and more opinions concerning how much of each the appraised person has. If the mistakes of one appraiser cancels the mistakes of another, perhaps we are headed down the right road. If they don't, we are merely compounding the confusion. Group appraisal also makes it difficult for the supervisor who has to explain other people's appraisals during the counseling interview.

If you are appraising on the basis of job performance, who knows best how well the individual has performed? I submit his supervisor. If he doesn't, there is something wrong with the organization or the supervisor, and group appraisals won't improve either one. In the case of a person working in a staff or service position, other people admittedly will know something of his performance. However, they will have only an incomplete or a distorted picture, and the supervisor can easily get this information to add to his own picture before he makes his final appraisal.

Now what does all this mean? It merely means that the best basis for appraising people for managerial development purposes is job performance and the best person to do it is their immediate supervisor.

## **Appraising Job Performance**

How do we go about appraising people on the basis of job performance? First it will require at least as much thinking, study and work as the manager would spend on a production, research or engineering problem. The returns are likely to be as great, too. To do the job well, each manager must prepare tools for his use and acquire certain skills. This is one job which no management consultant, no training specialist, no personnel department, nor administrative assistant can do for him. They might advise or perform details, but the major task is his.

To begin, the manager needs a description of the job. It need not be a detailed description such as used for job evaluation. A simple list of responsibilities will do as long as it meets certain requirements. One requirement is that the description be specific for the job in question. This is vital for effective appraisal and discussion. One common mistake in appraisal is to use the same general description or responsibility list for all jobs with the same title. General guides may speed up preparing job descriptions and format may be the same, but the details must be specific.

Another requirement is that the job description be developed by the two people concerned—the supervisor and the incumbent in the job. After all, who knows the job best? The common practice of having personnel people, industrial engineers, or administrative assistants prepare the descriptions almost always results in generalized lists of responsibilities, all in strict conformance

with an established pattern but of uncertain value for appraising job performance. Having the incumbent and his supervisor jointly prepare the description has the added advantage that each party better understands how the other person sees the job.

To appraise the performance of the individual, a performance standard for each major responsibility must be developed. We cannot appraise performance without a standard for comparison. Many managers object to this. They say that many managerial functions are too intangible to define precisely and therefore we cannot develop standards. This is pretty sloppy thinking. If the job exists, it can be described. If it has a useful purpose in the organization, standards can be developed for it.

If it has a purpose, goals must be established and results obtained in order to carry out that purpose. The expected results for each major responsibility are the standard of performance. Possibly, in the beginning, the standard may be rather arbitrary. However, experience will disclose the factors which make performance fall short of expectations. These can then be taken into account in modifying the standard to what can reasonably be expected under the circumstances. An important point is that the standard be high enough to require some effort to achieve. Low standards can result in nothing except mediocrity.

Again the way to go about this problem is to have the incumbent develop standards for his own job with the guidance and assistance of his supervisor. To develop standards, the incumbent will need to think through and arrive at answers to a number of ques-

tions: What will result if each major responsibility is handled capably and discharged fully? This is the question to which he must always return in determining his standards. Other questions which may assist in developing standards are the following: Why was this job created? What is it supposed to do for the company? In each area of responsibility what makes the real difference in whether it is done well or poorly? Is it cost, promptness, volume, quality, relationships with others or what? Answers to these questions should focus on final results rather than details or methods.

Now that performance standards are developed, it is no longer a matter of determining how much judgment, integrity, drive, vision, or other traits the man possesses. It is now a matter of asking, "Did he, or did he not achieve the expected results which were established as performance standards?" In those areas where he did not, reasons must be determined and the appropriate action decided upon.

### ***Appraising Promotability***

Another problem associated with appraisal programs is that of appraising promotability. Here again I believe a number of mistakes are being made, and that the biggest one is promoting people on the basis of certain personality traits which we attribute to them, or withholding promotion on the same basis. I think our ideas on the glamorous words "leader" and "leadership" are partially to blame. We tend to develop a set of personal characteristics for people in

high positions and we attribute their success to the fact that they have these traits. Actually while their success may possibly be due to the usually socially desirable traits, it may also be due to such undesirable ones as craftiness, dishonesty, toadyism or others. While many attempts have been made to show that leaders have certain common characteristics which make them leaders, no one has been able to prove it satisfactorily. Probably the right combination of circumstances has as much to do with it as personal qualities. Certainly men who were very successful in one environment have been miserable failures in another. The truth is that each individual is a unique mixture of mental, emotional and physical qualities, and probably a great variety of people can do any one job successfully.

Another mistake we make is attempting to judge potentiality. I submit that most industrial managers are way beyond their depth when they attempt this, and that even trained psychologists are unable to predict the future success of a person with any great degree of accuracy. We cannot be sure that a given person can go one step higher, two steps higher but not three steps higher. Sometimes these people fool us. They do things which they apparently have no business accomplishing and succeed way beyond our expectations. Others whom we judge to have great ability and potential fail to live up to our expectations.

In appraising promotability let us restrict our problem to the next position for which the person might logically be considered. This is better and easier than trying to determine ultimate poten-

tiality. Also we should consider a person for promotion only if performance in his present position is definitely satisfactory. Despite all the usually cited examples of successful people who failed when they were promoted, past performance is still about the best indicator of future performance.

An aid to better appraisal for promotability is to use position requirements or job specifications. These are statements of the education, training, experience and special skills needed to perform the job satisfactorily. You will notice I did not include personality traits, although I must admit the usual position requirement does include them. Using position requirements and comparing the qualifications of the individual with them enables the supervisor to use an organized approach at least. He can pretty well determine if the candidate is ready for promotion or if further experience and training are required. The difficulty with this approach however is that many managers think they already know the requirements for the jobs under their supervision and will not take the trouble to prepare position requirements. This does not prove that position requirements are not needed; it merely is another indicator that managers would prefer to continue to "bumble" along rather than apply the same resourcefulness and energy to their personnel problems that they do to their other responsibilities.

### ***The Appraisal Interview***

The interview is probably the most difficult part of any appraisal program.

Many supervisors would have no qualms at all about rating their people if they didn't have to discuss the rating with them. After all, they rate people in one way or another every day—for promotion, for hire, for transfer, for pay increase, for work assignments, and for many other purposes. The rub is in the telling. Most supervisors find this extremely difficult. Although we are told that one of the objectives of the program is to let people know how they are doing, many times the subordinate leaves the interview without knowing anything except that he and the boss discussed him and his job in some sort of a vague fashion. Or he has had his ego so bruised during the interview that it will never recover. In the process whatever good relationships he and the boss previously enjoyed are ruined forever. We have already said that one of the reasons for these troubles is that we too often rate and discuss people on the basis of personality traits rather than job performance. I am more convinced every day that the key to good appraisal interviews, aside from the personal skill of the interviewer, is to keep the discussion as job centered as possible.

If the supervisor is going to conduct a worthwhile interview with the subordinate he must make adequate preparation and he must prepare the person to be interviewed. Let us see some of the things which must be done to get ready for the interview.

We will presume that the employee has already been appraised on the basis of performance standards or results expected for each of his major responsibilities. Our next step is to prepare a

balance sheet of responsibilities or areas where results were and were not up to standard. This will serve as a guide for the discussion or interview. Then analyze the situation for possible reasons or causes for failure to achieve results. Also consider possible actions to help the subordinate improve. Above all we should establish definite objectives for the particular interview. Do we want to discuss promotion possibilities? Do we want to achieve improvement in a particular area of the job? Just what do we want to accomplish? One of the dangers here is that the objective may be too broad and too general. Common sense should tell us that we cannot hope to obtain a complete about-face or vast improvement from one interview. We should limit ourselves to one major area at a time and when improvement has been made there, go on to the next. All this preparation serves as a guide for discussion during the interview. Our purpose is not to write the complete script ahead of time. If you do you might as well send him a letter.

We must also prepare the employee for the interview. He should know ahead of time what it is all about, and should have some idea of how it will be done. He should perceive this as an opportunity to discuss the job and to improve it. Select the proper time and place for the interview, free from interruption. The result should be a planned interview with both parties prepared.

For the interview itself, I like a modified problem-solving approach rather than one of the more direct methods. It allows the subordinate to help deter-

mine areas where improvement is needed and results in a plan for improvement which he has helped develop. Lasting results will be more likely when this has been the case. Unfortunately, it requires more skill than some of the more direct methods.

The problem-solving interview will generally follow a pattern. The supervisor should know the pattern and keep the interview moving toward successful conclusion. The usual problem-solving interview will take the following form: determine areas where results were not up to standard, explore possible causes for lack of results, consider possible actions for improvement, develop the improvement plan.

If performance standards or expectations have been previously developed and used, determining areas where results were not achieved should be no great problem. Goals were reached or they were not. And the subordinate will know this as well or better than the supervisor.

Where goals were not reached the two participants must now determine why. This calls for an extensive search for causes. The supervisor must be careful not to accept the first cause offered by the subordinate. All possibilities must be thoroughly explored and in at least three areas—those due to the subordinate, those due to the supervisor, and those due to the situation. In exploring causes the supervisor must avoid jumping to conclusions that the cause for failure is some personal trait. It may be, but it probably is not. If it is, one should expect little immediate change. A man's basic personality is stabilized

fairly early in life, and although under favorable conditions changes do occur, they generally come about gradually rather than as a result of a sudden voluntary change. Just pointing out a person's weaknesses and telling him he must change seldom brings about the desired effect. If detrimental traits are discussed at all they should be brought up by the subordinate, not the supervisor.

After a thorough search for possible causes the interview should move into a discussion of possible actions. It is helpful to discuss as many actions as possible. This should be a creative process rather than a critical one.

The next step is to develop a program for self development or improvement from the possible actions discussed. The plan should also include provisions for follow up or other control activities so that the supervisor can check on the employee and himself to see that the program is being carried out.

We have discussed the general pattern which the interview should take but have said little concerning the attitude and role of the interviewer and the skills which he must develop.

In the first place, if the interview is going to accomplish its purpose the supervisor must lay aside the usual role of a judge and assume the role of a helper. He should not be in a hurry to transmit his appraisal of the employee. It may be desirable to postpone it until after the interview. In addition he should be ready and willing to change his appraisal if information brought out during the interview warrants such a change.

The interviewer should be careful about specifying areas for improvement. He should first try to stimulate thinking and get the employee to designate them himself if possible. He should be willing to consider all ideas for job improvement that the employee brings up. He must also try to see the job as the employee sees it. All this will be easier and the two people's ideas of the job will likely be pretty similar if the employee has previously developed his own job description and performance standards with the help and guidance of the supervisor.

For a successful interview, the interviewer must acquire skill in the use of questions and in summarizing. Directive questions are useful to guide the discussion and keep it on the track. Non-directive questions are useful to determine the views and feelings of the subordinate. They can also be used to stimulate a subordinate to evaluate ideas and possible action and to make him think more clearly. These questions again should focus on the job rather than the personal weakness of the employee. Questions which center on personal weaknesses are generally perceived as threatening by the employee and will not stimulate thinking or evaluation.

Skill in summarizing serves many purposes, and opportunities for useful summaries will occur a number of times during the interview. They are useful for testing or demonstrating understanding of ideas which have been expressed. They create opportunities to check and refine ideas. They are also useful in making the transition from one point in the interview to the next. It may be

valuable to have the subordinate summarize the interview and improvement plan at the end in order to make sure that both parties understand what was discussed and who will do what and when.

### **Summary**

Let us now take a brief look at the ground we have covered. We have deplored the fact that appraisal programs as a management development activity have not achieved the results expected of them. The chief reason for this failure is the emphasis given to personality traits in the appraisal and the following interview. Both the appraisal and the interview should be focused on job performance. Thus industrial people will be working in an area they know something about rather than lost in the field of psychology. This can be better achieved by developing good job descriptions, performance standards, and position requirements which are job centered. They can be used as guides and measuring devices to determine the individual's performance in his present job or his readiness for promotion. Their use will also make the interview easier by keeping the discussion job centered rather than centered on non-definable, non-measurable personality traits. Performance standards and position requirements also aid in determining development programs, for they indicate goals to be achieved and help determine what developmental activities should be undertaken.