

# "PLAY WELL THY PART"

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Managers continue to have difficulties conducting effective performance appraisal interviews. Symptomatic of these difficulties are frequent reports that managers and subordinates leave the interview with little exchange of usable information, fail to set agreed-upon goals and objectives,<sup>1</sup> feel anxious about the interview, produce little change in subsequent behavior, and not infrequently fail to even hold an interview — the "vanishing performance appraisal" phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

These symptoms are not new, nor have they gone unaddressed by those interested in improving the skills of managers. Hundreds of thousands of manager hours have been devoted to trying to help managers overcome their appraisal skill deficiencies. These hours have been spent listening to lectures, discussing interviewing problems, viewing videotaped interviews and on a variety of other methods. Of all the methods used, the role play has probably been the

most prominent method used to train managers in this area. Its popularity is based on the belief that classroom practice is an effective method of learning how to conduct an appraisal interview. Despite its popularity, managers who have conducted one or two role playing appraisal interviews continue to have problems conducting effective appraisal interviews.

## Standard Role Playing Exercises

The model for most appraisal interview role playing exercises is the Stanley-Burke exercise developed by the late Norman Maier.<sup>3</sup> In this exercise, one person is given the role description for George Stanley (an engineering department section head), another the role of Tom Burke (a supervisor reporting to Stanley), and a third acts as an observer. Once the actors have studied their respective roles, the Stanley-Burke interview takes place, followed by feedback on the effectiveness of the interview.

The Stanley-Burke exercise is

useful in highlighting the dynamics of mutual information exchange, the role of goal and objective setting in appraisal interviews, and the ease with which a manager can fail to pick up on job problems the subordinate may have. In my experience it is an effective method of *sensitizing* managers to performance appraisal interview problems. Coupled with videotaped and observer-to Stanley feedback, it can help prepare managers to change the ways they conduct appraisal interviews.

A problem with the Stanley-Burke interview is that it does not take the manager *far enough*. For example, thoughtful managers used to conducting a "Tell and Sell"<sup>4</sup> interview may attribute the apparent failure of this method in this role play to the peculiarities of the role information, or to the idiosyncrasies of the person playing the Burke role. This is essentially the problem of any one-shot training session. It may alert the manager to a need for change, or at least raise doubts about the universal applicability of their present approach to the appraisal inter-

view, but it isn't enough to change behavior. For skill acquisition, repeated practice is a necessary condition.<sup>5</sup>

Two follow-up methods are described in this article. Both methods avoid the dual problems of boredom inherent in doing several standard role plays and the lack of involvement that may result from simply watching videotaped interviews. The first is the use of an "advisory role play" in which a group of managers provide advice to the person who will be conducting the appraisal interview. The second is a "transcript writing exercise" in which the manager puts himself/herself in the role of both manager and subordinate and writes the anticipated dialogue for the upcoming interview.

Explicit is the belief that one source of interviewing problems is managers' attempts to use the same interviewing method in all situations. In my experience, a characteristic of those managers who get results from appraisal interviews is that they tailor their method to the situation.

### The Advisory Role Play

The advisory role play (ARP) attempts to capitalize on the sensitization frequently observed among managers after they have gone through a standard role playing exercise. The ARP makes use of this sensitization by providing a vehicle for managers to give their advice to a fellow manager about to conduct an appraisal interview, as well as a chance to be involved observers of an interview they have played a role in designing.

The procedure is simple. All managers in the training group, as well as the role players, are asked to read a case which portrays the setting for the interview and the events leading up to it. The interviewer and interviewee are given the usual role descriptions in advance of the interview. After the whole group and the interviewer have given some thought to the upcoming interview, and while the interviewee is absent, the group advises the interviewer about how to conduct the interview. At the outset the advice is typically quite general — conduct a tell-and-listen

interview, or tell the interviewee what you think about his/her performance, etc. — but this quickly turns into more specific advice about how to open the interview, what to do if he/she fails to get a response, etc. If the group waffles about giving such concrete advice, the trainer can remind the group that one of their peers is soon to be "on the line." Following the advice-giving phase, the interview takes place. After this the interviewer can give an evaluation of his/her performance, followed by the interviewee's evaluation and then a group critique of the interview.

Selection of the interviewer is of some importance. It should be someone the trainer has identified as being flexible and able to improvise, but should not be someone who is clearly an "all-star," because this may reduce the transfer value of the exercise. Choosing among several volunteers may be

the most convenient method of doing this. The critical element is that the interviewer be able to incorporate *some* of the advice from the group. Experience with this technique has shown that it is most effective when the interviewer has been able to incorporate some of the advice from the group, since then group members get a chance to see what might happen if someone else put their advice into practice.

To summarize, the advisory role play is a training method in which the group provides advice for an upcoming interview, some of the advice is incorporated by the interviewer, the interview takes place and a critique of the interview follows. The ARP is an economical device that provides a common interview for all group members to discuss, while involving them to a greater extent than is true when they simply watch (or watch a

Figure 1.

#### EXCERPTS FROM A TRANSCRIPT WRITTEN FOR THE DOMINION ACCEPTANCE COMPANY LTD. CASE.

- Keast:* Good morning, Ron. As you know we're here to review the performance of this branch. The improvements in the operations since my last visit have been noted and are appreciated. However, there remain many problems still outstanding and we have to get them cleared up today. . . . Frankly, Ron, these are the areas that worry me: your relationship with the staff, your non-adherence to the procedures manual, the number of new accounts, and authority delegation in the office.
- Snell:* Excuse me, Mr. Keast, I understand what you are saying, but I feel that in all fairness you should realize that all those problems stem from the inadequacies of the staff I have. . . .
- Keast:* The procedures manual states that the manager should do extensive field work. However, your new accounts have declined and you are hardly ever out of the office. Could you tell me why this has happened?
- Snell:* As I said, it depends on the personnel. How can I leave the office if I'm not sure the assistant manager is capable of running it in my absence?
- Keast:* I can understand this when Jerry was here, but do you have any doubts about De Coste's abilities? . . .
- Keast:* But are they realistic? We try to pay competitive wages. The collection officers here are making substantially below the average for collection officers with similar lengths of service. The salaries will have to be brought into line. Now, I still don't understand the business of the dinners and breaks. Why did you feel this was necessary?
- Snell:* I felt I had to tighten up in order to discipline a non-performing staff. I was controlling the expense side.
- Keast:* What effect do you think this had on the workforce?
- Snell:* They got used to it.
- Keast:* Ron, this really hurt. The employees feel gypped, especially when some breaks are mandatory. That is one reason why it is important to adhere to the procedures manual. Ron, what I hear you saying is that you were controlling costs "to tighten up." But this has really cost the branch in longer-run performance. Is that close?
- Snell:* Yes. I thought it was what you would want me to do.
- Keast:* This puzzles me. When I look at the records, the change crops up first about June of last year. Is there some factor which would account for this sudden decline? . . .

videotape of) an interview.

### Transcript Writing Exercise

A second technique is the transcript writing exercise (TWE). The TWE can be used separately, or in tandem with the advisory role play. Essentially, the TWE tries to move the manager from the position of interviewer to a situation in which s/he plays both roles. The purpose is to have the manager think about the interview as a mutual information exchange setting, rather than the simpler manager-to-subordinate frame of reference. This is not easy because it is not the way we are accustomed to thinking. As a result, some "hand-holding" is required.

The assignment given is the following: X will be conducting an appraisal interview with Y. Provide a script for X to follow and explain your rationale for conducting the interview in this way. We are primarily interested in how well you, as X, will handle this interview, but we also expect you to provide realistic responses for Y.

The TWE is made easier if the group has read transcripts before. The ones provided by Maier<sup>6</sup> have been the ones I've used and they help to make the TWE seem less unusual.

Figure 1 shows excerpts from a transcript written for a case called Dominion Acceptance<sup>7</sup> in which a trust company regional manager (Keast) is conducting an appraisal interview with a branch manager (Snell) whose performance decline is apparent to Keast, but the causes are unclear. The sample is representative of what the transcripts look like. Further examples may be found in Dominion Acceptance Teaching Note.<sup>8</sup>

To summarize, the transcript writing exercise requires managers to confront the uncertainty about mutual information exchange they take into an appraisal interview setting by having them write both parts of an interview. While the focus is primarily on what they should say as the interviewer, they also have to provide what they anticipate to be realistic responses

from the subordinate.

### A Two-Day Workshop

The sequential use of standard role playing exercises, the advisory role play and the transcript writing exercise can now be described. Prereading for the workshop could include papers by Maier,<sup>9</sup> and Cummings and Schwab.<sup>10</sup> Figure 2 provides an outline for an intensive two-day workshop incorporating the elements described above. The schedule is based on a training group of 15 to 20 people.

The sequence begins with a standard role play, transcript reading, and a second standard role play on the first day, with the TWE and ARP on the second day. An alternate sequence is to substitute the ARP for the second standard role play on the first day, and move the second standard role

**Figure 2.**  
**OUTLINE FOR A TWO-DAY  
APPRAISAL INTERVIEW TRAINING WORKSHOP.**

<b>Day One</b>	
Introduction	1 hour
Assignment and reading of roles for Stanley-Burke Exercise	¼ hour
Stanley-Burke Exercise	½ hour
Feedback (from videotape and/or observer)	½ hour
Coffee	¼ hour
Discussion of Stanley-Burke Exercise	1 hour
Reading Maier Transcripts	1 hour
Lunch	1 hour
Discussion of Maier Transcripts	1 hour
Assignment and reading of roles for Jones-Marshall Exercise	¼ hour
Jones-Marshall Exercise	½ hour
Feedback (from videotape and/or observer)	½ hour
Discussion of Jones-Marshall Exercise	¾ hour
General Discussion, Case A distribution, role assignments and assignments of Transcript Writing Exercise	1 hour
	9½ hours
<b>Evening of Day One</b>	
Individual reading of Case A and Transcript Writing Exercise	2-3 hours
Bar Service	
<b>Day Two</b>	
Review of Day One	½ hour
Case A Advisory Phase of ARP	¾ hour
Case A Role Play Phase of ARP	½ hour
Coffee	¼ hour
Discussion of Case A Role Play	¾ hour
Assignment of roles, distribution and reading of Case B	1 hour
Group Transcript Writing Exercise for Case B (lunch scheduled in)	2 hours
Case B Advisory Phase of ARP	¾ hour
Case B Role Play Phase of ARP	½ hour
Discussion of Case B Role Play	½ hour
General Discussion, Goal Setting, Summary and Conclusions	1½ hours
	9 hours

play to the afternoon of day two.

The first day begins and ends with discussions of performance appraisal interview problems, with the two standard role play exercises providing the central focus. The ones used here are the Stanley-Burke and Jones-Marshall<sup>11</sup> exercises. Both are conducted in the usual way, followed by feedback from both the observers and videotapes, if available. The post-feedback general discussions can proceed by having each Stanley/Jones describe how they had planned to conduct the interview, followed by the observers' accounts of the interviews and the Burke/Marshall statements of what they thought the outcomes of the interviews were.

In between the two exercises are the Maier interview transcripts,<sup>12</sup> which are based on the

Stanley-Burke roles. A useful method is to discuss one each of the tell and sell, tell and listen and problem solving transcripts, focusing on *when* each might be used. Group members may propose initial models as to when each method might be most appropriate. One that frequently emerges at this stage is a two-factor model; the first represents the current level of employee performance and the second is how much knowledge the supervisor has about the source of the employee's performance problems.

Problem solving is frequently suggested for the high performer, while a tell and sell is suggested for the poor performer when the supervisor has a good understanding about the source of the performance problem. When these conditions are not met, a tell and listen interview is often recommended. Additional factors such as employee preferences, type of manager-subordinate relationship, etc., can also be argued for. Whatever models emerge, the point is to have managers recognize that the same method will not be universally effective. If time permits, the initial models may be revised during the general discussion that ends the first day.

After the points from the two exercises have been summarized, the trainer then distributes Case A, which will form the basis of the transcript writing exercise. The TWE may then be described, the role players for the advisory role play selected and the first day wrapped up. A case that works well here, and for which there are role descriptions and sample transcripts, is the dominion acceptance<sup>13</sup> case mentioned earlier.

The evening of the first day is devoted to the TWE. Even when the Maier transcripts have been read, some "hand-holding" will be necessary for some managers. Stress should be placed on the process, not the exact wording. Managers should be discouraged from dwelling on the details of the subordinates' responses. During the evening the trainer will also want to go over the roles of the players

with them. Characteristic responses of the subordinate should be discussed with him/her, while the planned method of the supervisor should be reviewed in some detail.

The first day is long. A bar service around 10 p.m. would be welcomed and provides a vehicle for idea exchange about Case A and the TWE.

### Day Two

The review of day one which opens day two may be used to restate the working models and/or as a setting for surfacing managers' feelings about the previous day. Following this, the Case A advisory role play is conducted, followed by the distribution of Case B and the assignment of roles. The transcript writing exercise which is incorporated with Case B may switch to a group exercise or continue with the individual TWE. The group exercise may be preferable because by that time most of the managers have gotten accustomed to arguing their viewpoints with each other,

and natural groups have formed. During the transcript writing period the role players can again be coached.

In order to increase the transfer value of the training and to widen the range of interviews experienced, a broader case may be desirable. A case such as the case of the plateaued performer<sup>14</sup> fills such a need in that the interview is between a president and his vice-president of marketing over what to do with a young sales manager whom the vice-president wants to transfer because of alleged inexperience.

An alternative which has worked well (but which is nevertheless risky) is a case called Karen Lappin.<sup>15</sup> This case centers around the personal lives of an assistant trust company manager and his head cashier, whose affair is causing work problems. The branch manager has to decide whom to interview and how. A third option is the Peter Hoskins case<sup>16</sup> which focuses on the prob-

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lems of managing a consultant who has become unreliable, has health and family problems, and who has not been appraised for some time. Whatever case is chosen, the trainer should attempt to broaden the context of the training to increase its transfer value to more than standard appraisal interview settings.

Following the second ARP, the trainer needs to tie the preceding two days together. Depending on his/her skills, preferences, and goals, the trainer may want to elaborate a more complex model, or draw one or more from the group. Whatever method is used, the point is to reinforce the idea that exclusively using a single method will frequently result in a mismatch with the situation faced by managers. The absence of a validated prescriptive model should be openly confronted.

The standard and advisory role plays and the transcript writing exercise permit managers to both practice and see a variety of interviewing methods. The intention is to develop the idea that having a repertoire of methods and some guides to their uses will improve appraisal interviewing. Practice in using the methods is provided, as well as opportunities to be involved observer of others' interviews. As a result, managers should go beyond the sensitization stage and decrease the frequency of a given manager's interviewing method failing to match the interview situation. Hence the prediction made is that the interview problems identified at the beginning of this article should decline following training, compared to either managers with no training or those receiving standard role play training.

Evidence from performance rating training<sup>17</sup> and handling employee problem training<sup>18</sup> suggests that when role playing is coupled with extensive feedback and modelling opportunities, the results are stronger than when more standard methods are used.

### Summary

Role playing exercises are a widely used method of improving

manager's appraisal interviewing skills. Two methods which build on and extend the basic role play are described. The advisory role play allows managers to see an interview conducted in which the interviewer uses some of their ideas. The transcript writing exercise places the managers in the role of both interviewer and interviewee, thereby increasing their sensitivity to the information exchange aspects of appraisal interviews. A two-day workshop was described which utilizes standard role plays, the advisory role play, and the transcript writing exercise as part of a package, the purpose of which is to broaden and sharpen a manager's skills in conducting appraisal interviews.

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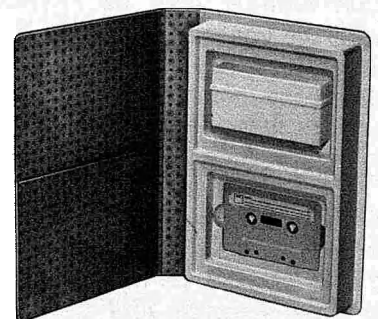
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