

Training 101

Coming and Going

The first few weeks in a new job are an exciting but difficult time. For the organization-development specialist, the transition is complicated by the need to strike a balance between fitting in as an employee and being effective as an internal OD consultant.

Sometimes HRD professionals have other people's careers on their minds. Performance appraisals can be important tools for reviewing progress toward personal and corporate goals. Unfortunately, many companies view the appraisal as a once-a-year chat, rather than an integrated system for measuring, planning, and evaluating employee performance.

Even the most effective appraisal system can't turn every poor performer into a valued employee. When you've tried everything else, it may be time to get ready, take aim, and prepare to fire. Telling an employee that he or she is "being let go" is one of the hardest jobs a manager may have to do, but in the long run, it can be the best thing for the company and the underachieving employee.

Getting Off on the Right Foot

By Nedra Weinstein, assistant manager for organizational development and training at the Washington Post, Washington, DC.

When an organization-development specialist joins a new company, he or she usually comes equipped with theories and skills that relate to OD practices and issues. What many newly hired OD practitioners don't have is an understanding of their own personal and professional entry issues. Because of the nature of the profession, OD practitioners must try to become personally connected to the workplace, while maintaining a

distance that allows for critical analysis of the organization.

In the beginning

Any new employee who enters a workplace must go through a transition period as he or she moves through levels of inclusion—first in the hiring process, then in the immediate work group, and later in broader and higher levels of the organization.

Edgar Schein has described such a process as the reaching of a "psychological contract." According to Schein, that contract matches "what the individual will give with what the organization expects to receive, and what the organization will give relative to what the individual expects to receive."

Successful employees enter into such contracts through symbolic gestures and deliberate actions. If either party fails to meet expectations, certain consequences are predictable. When an employer's expectations of an employee are not met, the organization may terminate or demote the employee. If the organization does not live up to the employee's expectations, low morale, poor performance, or the employee's resignation may result.

The newly hired OD practitioner has personal and professional needs for being "included" in the workplace, but must be cautious about negotiating the psychological contract. New employees tend to be more open to influence than at any other time during their tenure at a company. But if the OD practitioner is to build an effective OD practice, he or she cannot be co-opted by the contract. Newly hired OD practitioners must be careful not to align themselves with the status quo. Maintaining a degree of objectivity is essential for gathering valid data, making accurate assessments, and providing functional consulting. So the need for inclusion in the workplace must be met through other means.

Balancing workplace affiliation with objective distance requires a belief in the power of organization development. That belief provides a professional confidence that helps bridge the awkward daily transitions between workplace and organization that are experienced by internal practitioners.

Newly hired OD practitioners can help alleviate that awkwardness by convincing organization members that OD works. When co-workers accept the value of OD, they learn to accept the dual role of the OD practitioner; that acceptance helps the practitioner to feel more affiliated with the workplace. Professional success yields personal acceptance.

On the other hand, an OD professional who has doubts about the field may find that the tension created by conflicting personal and professional needs is intensified. In the face of such doubt, clarity of purpose fades, analytical skills weaken, and OD efforts suffer. The practitioner may be searching for "accepted" processes or personalities to align with in the workplace. In some organizations that may promote personal acceptance and even advancement, but it has nothing to do with successful organization development.

The balancing act

Confidence in organization development is not always achieved the day a practitioner begins work. Once it is achieved, it is not always sustained. To achieve that confidence, to revive it, or to keep it on track:

- Make use of opportunities to do anything with a group. That includes training or any other activity that puts you in front of groups. When you're with a group, introduce the concept of group technology. Point out the organizational dynamics of everything.
- Act confident and enthusiastic about OD activities and strategies.

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Foster a sense of their power and effectiveness. Use concrete examples of success from personal experiences or literature on the subject. Use professional terminology to convey the idea that OD is a legitimate field. Organization members are intrigued by what goes on in other organizations and in a field that studies organizations.

- Build trust through confidentiality. Anything learned from vulnerability of a client is sacred—to pass it on is to destroy co-workers' perceptions of you as an impartial analyst.

- Use metaphors to enliven the OD message and to make concepts understandable. Draw metaphors from the context of organization activities. Visual imagery and unusual analogies will help give organization members a more objective perspective on the system.

- Maintain outside support systems. Keep contact with professional organizations to bolster your confidence in the field and to gain perspective on your activities. Also maintain outside support systems or interests that have nothing to do with OD so that you can distance yourself entirely from the field at times.

- Don't mix employee issues with consultant issues. Never discuss your personal stake in something that is being assessed in your OD efforts. Your client also happens to be your employer, but don't bring up your vulnerability as an employee.

- Believe that if you had to, you could live without the organization. Play the "what's the worst thing that could happen?" game sometimes.

- Begin early with distinct role shaping for clients and the boss. Establish the fact that you can say no to a contract just like an external consultant can. (That should begin during the hiring process.)

Many of those suggestions may help the newly hired OD practitioner to preserve a professional stance. But he or she is also an employee. An internal OD practi-

tioner can find ways to experience the role of employee without jeopardizing OD efforts:

- Immerse yourself in the organization. Find ways to show the company that you can think and function with non-OD issues. Learn the technology of the company and speak up when you have ideas about it.

- Work within the system, not around it. Keep managers informed about everything and give them credit when merited.

- Find someone to be an employee with, someone with whom you can share common complaints and joys. Have the kind of conversations you hear your clients having. Allow yourself to complain irrationally without always slipping into an analysis of the circumstances.

Reflecting on the experience

The newly hired OD practitioner has a difficult task in balancing personal and professional needs. Even as the struggle is going on, he or she should take the time to reflect on the entry experience. Issues raised during that period are similar to the issues of awareness and change that the OD practitioner will raise in organization members.

The successful OD practitioner is one who gets organization members to achieve new perspectives on their work, and then helps them to sustain those perspectives while maintaining affiliation with their workplace. The entry experience of the internal OD specialist can increase his or her awareness and provide a foundation for understanding the "OD effect" on the organization.

Effective Performance Appraisal

By Harold Scharlatt, president of Training and Development Associates, 3608 Bircham Way, Lexington, KY 40515.

Human resource directors often talk about training their companies' managers to do performance appraisals. That's unfortunate. Performance appraisals do not succeed because managers have completed a workshop, even an excellent workshop. Performance-appraisal training is a significant but small part of implementing an entire performance-appraisal system.

Critical factors

When an organization's managers decide to do (or do better) performance appraisals, they must keep in mind three factors:

- The organization is already doing appraisals. Even if no formal approach exists, people are getting promoted (or not), coached, disciplined, critiqued, paid, and reviewed. A new appraisal system must take into account the formal or informal process that is already in place.

- Past experiences with appraisals create a climate—either positive or negative—for the adoption of a more rigorous process. Employees at every level of the organization will probably expect the new plan to include many of the dysfunctional aspects of ill-conceived or poorly managed systems they have worked with in the past. Unfortunately, such criticisms as "more form than substance," "just more meaningless paperwork," "another way to stick it to the employees," and "a total waste of time" often are valid complaints. In such cases, an appraisal becomes more a headache than a helpful communication tool.

- Productive performance appraisals require a comprehensive and integrated set of activities, an entire system for performance planning, measurement, and appraisal—not a yearly sit-down chat, such as many companies use. Top management must make a commitment to implementing such a system. Implementation must be carefully planned, orchestrated, evaluated,

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and refined over a long period of time; companies should not capriciously jump into it.

A "win-win" situation

A well-managed performance-appraisal process is truly a "win-win" situation. Managers' jobs are easier, subordinates are more productive, and the organization is a more honest, open, and pleasant place to work.

Objectives of a system for planning, measuring, and appraising employee performance:

- Develop measurable performance criteria.
- Clarify acceptable standards of performance.

- Provide subordinates with clear directions.
- Ensure an understanding of responsibilities.
- Improve mutual goal setting.
- Help managers to be objective in evaluating subordinates.
- Give employees specific, constructive feedback.
- Improve coaching and counseling.
- Enhance mutual problem solving.
- Initiate upward feedback.
- Provide performance documentation.
- Improve equitability in compensation.
- Assist employees in realistic career planning.

- Identify "high potential" and "problem" employees.
- Determine individual and organizational training and development needs.

A major intervention

Developing a system to meet those objectives is, of course, a complex and time-consuming undertaking. The design must be customized to meet the needs of the organization; procedures for individual firms will vary in scope and sequence. The steps outlined in the box, "A Step-By-Step Approach to Performance Appraisal Systems," represent a typical process for helping a company implement such a system; the

A Step-By-Step Approach to Performance-Appraisal Systems

- 1. Meet with the human resource director to get his or her perspective on what kind of system is needed, why it is appropriate, how and when it can be implemented, and where the implementation should start.
- 2. Meet with other top managers to get their perspectives on the project.
- 3. Submit an "intent proposal" to summarize understanding of goals, intent, and expectations.
- 4. Meet with top management to clarify understandings.
- 5. Interview key managers to learn the pros and cons of the current formal or informal system.
- 6. Survey all managers for further knowledge of the present situation and future expectations.
- 7. Summarize the findings to provide a benchmark for further comparison.
- 8. Develop a proposal that outlines the necessary actions for full implementation of the program.
- 9. Meet with all top management to review findings and get your action plan accepted.
- 10. Develop options and recommendations; highlight pros and cons of various approaches.
- 11. Review options and recommendations. Top management will choose the approach.
- 12. Design documentation to support the chosen system.
- 13. Determine the relationship of the new appraisal system to compensation, and show how it ties into the organization's compensation procedures.
- 14. Review materials with key managers to check for clarity and practicality.
- 15. Inform all managers about the new plan; be sure to go over what the plan will do, why it is being implemented, how it works, and where and when it will start.
- 16. Develop a program for providing consistent, high-quality appraisal training.
- 17. Train managers in the mechanics of the system.
- 18. Train managers in coaching skills to increase their coaching and counseling effectiveness.
- 19. Have managers begin implementing the plan. They should start by holding a series of meetings with subordinates to define job responsibilities, select measurement criteria, and set specific targets. In reviewing progress toward the targets, they may need to adjust goals, solve problems, or capitalize on assets. That will eventually lead to a formal appraisal session, probably held annually.
- 20. Interview key managers to review progress and problems.
- 21. Evaluate implementation with an in-depth review.
- 22. Review findings with top management so that the project can be evaluated and refined.
- 23. Prepare suggestions for ongoing efforts, including how to maintain the system and how to use it to aid in long-range planning.
- 24. Review suggestions with the human resource director, handing over full responsibility for carrying on with the new system.

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time it takes to accomplish each step will depend on such factors as the size of the organization, credibility of the human resource department, and motivation of top management.

Even if all the conditions are right and the steps proceed smoothly, instituting an effective performance-appraisal system is a major intervention. But it is worth the effort; any organization can benefit from a comprehensive, pragmatic approach to planning, measuring, and evaluating employee performance.

Ready, Aim, Fire

By Stanley M. Herman, a management consultant with Herman Associates, 4052 Mabaila Avenue, Suite D, San Diego, CA 92122, and Michael D. Herman, a freelance writer.

Phil's reports are wrong again. The complaints from other departments are worse than ever. You have been unprepared and embarrassed in the last two executive committee reviews because Phil's work was late. How much longer are you going to put up with it?

Phil is a nice person, friendly and sensitive. So are you. That's part of the problem. So you just keep waiting for Phil to do better, hoping for a change that never comes. You start dropping hints to Phil that his work could stand improvement, but he continues as before.

Many well-meaning managers do more harm than good by "sparing the feelings" of unsatisfactory performers. But what else can you do? Is it your responsibility to get the employee to improve, or should you make a clean break and terminate the poor performer?

Ready

You must be ready to face the facts; stop waiting for things to change. The employee must understand

- that you are seriously dissatisfied—the need for change is urgent;
- what specific changes in performance are needed.

Consider carefully any employee objections. In some cases, they may convince you to change your requirements. But points that you cannot agree on should be done your way; after all, you are the boss.

Aim

If workers know what is expected of them, they can try to perform accordingly; those who don't know what to aim for obviously have little chance of hitting the mark. Employees are often unclear about requirements, priorities, and standards of their jobs. In such cases, good performance is strictly accidental.

Management scholar Peter Drucker recommended the priority objectives letter, a one-page letter from subordinate to boss, containing a series of sentence openings. The following is a revised version of Drucker's series:

- For the next (3, 4, or 12) months, as I understand it, the three most important objectives of our department are _____.
- The 1 to 3 objectives of my job that contribute to the above objectives are _____.
- Factors that contribute to my meeting those objectives are _____.
- Major obstacles to my meeting those objectives are _____.
- Actions you and others in our department can take that would most help me to eliminate or reduce the obstacles are _____.

After the manager has filled in the blanks, manager and subordinate should discuss the objectives and how to accomplish them.

Fire

Managers should consider a few other possibilities before saying that final goodbye. Maybe an employee does not have the ability to perform

certain tasks. Many people are good at some things and totally unsuited for others; we can't expect all workers to be well rounded. Perhaps the manager can make use of special talents by adapting the organization. For example, if a worker performs certain tasks poorly, the boss may consider moving those duties to someone else in the department, and replacing them with new responsibilities that are more compatible with the employee's abilities.

Firing an employee is difficult for most managers, even after everything else has failed; a few social scientists call it the organizational equivalent of banishment or execution. But people rarely die from being fired. Many go on to jobs they like better.

If you have to fire someone, do your agonizing in advance. Once you have made the decision, be firm. Arrange to give the employee adequate notice and the most liberal termination allowances you can, but don't expect gratitude. It may be better for him or her to leave angry, determined to prove that the company has made a mistake.

The termination interview is probably the toughest part of the process. If you have done your job up to that point, the employee probably knows what to expect, but that doesn't mean it will be easy to take. If the employee wants to rant a bit and complain, don't try to talk him or her out of it. This is not the time to justify the company's position or convert the employee to your way of thinking. If the person has questions, answer them briefly and without elaboration. Say goodbye with a clear voice.

"Training 101" is edited by Cathy Petrini. Send your short articles for consideration to: Training 101, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.