

Appraisal anyone?

As we go into the latter half of the third quarter of the year (September to you and me!), HR departments are gearing up ready for that annual jamboree know as the roll-out of the performance appraisal system. Most are timed to coincide with the pre-Christmas period and all of them generate emotions like no other management system ever invented. Just like the screams and laughter in *Monsters Inc*, if we could capture the emotional energy emanating throughout this stressful time Gordon Brown's intransigence over reducing tax on fuel would be irrelevant because we would have all the free energy we needed.

So why do these systems cause so much bother? The answer is that they don't! As always it's a mixture of things, but the biggest causes of discontent are without doubt to do with the people who



participate in the systems and not typically the systems in isolation. As with Sven Goran Eriksson's much criticised system, it is only as good as the people using it at the time. If the players had adjusted their approach sufficiently they would have got better results. In organisations if employees regard a system as an immovable object it will not be working at its best for them. It's a fairly widely held view that far too many managers have been battered into submission by the imposition of these systems that they now fail to challenge them as perhaps they should. Far too many members of staff simply don't understand the very basics of performance review – why do the company do it in the first place? what does it achieve for the company? Etc etc. Far too many HR departments adopt the traditional policing role and spend too much time 'harassing' managers and staff into blind compliance with a system that is typically an HR creation drawn from text books and free websites. Far too many performance management policies fail to cover the critical definition of why a performance review system even exists in the first place – it just does, OK! Equally the policies don't typically cover the anticipated worth of a performance review system to all those involved. The

Monty Python team wouldn't hesitate to shout out – "What did a performance review system ever do for us?"

Each review of the system results in inexplicable tweaks that bewilder line managers. Be bewildered no more folks – it's done to stop those awkward line managers (yes you!) from doing things during the process, and on the form, that the HR department just don't want you to do. The pursuit of a performance appraisal nirvana is actually an exercise in 'failsafeing' the system against human meddling.

The HR department are not the only villains though. Many managers will say one thing to the appraisee and another to the other members of the management team. Just as many would prefer not to give their staff feedback at all. Let's get one thing straight, the vast majority of people DO want feedback on their performance. If it is good they want the praise; if it is bad they want the understanding about what they need to do better and the chance to improve. The small minority who don't want feedback have stopped caring for some reason. In this instance you either have a de-motivated team member or someone who just isn't bothered about anything other than their pay check. The former needs a leg up; the latter needs a boot out!

The start of any good system is in defining why you need, or want it, and also what you plan to get out of it. I'd go a little further and add in that you also need to identify what other systems are related to it and how exactly you want your employees at various levels to react to it.

The start of any good system is in defining why you need, or want it, and also what you plan to get out of it. I'd go a little further and add in that you also need to identify what other systems are related to it and how exactly you want your employees at various levels to react to it. Having this overt constitution for your performance review system is just the starting point in a long race towards improvement and consistency. Far too many companies fill their policies with the mechanics of doing performance appraisals rather than answering all the questions "Why?"

There are so many aspects to this expansive subject area that I will just cover the aspects of performance system set up and some of the critical issues you must resolve before even worrying about logistics and forms.

When considering what type of system you wish to create one of the first things to resolve is just exactly how it will compliment and reinforce the company culture you want to have for your organisation. Having something that is incongruous with what you are trying to achieve certainly won't help and may in fact hinder your progress as a business. For example if you want to have a team orientated environment that involves high levels of mutual support, trust and information sharing then one of the most fundamental mistakes you can make is to have your review system focussed on individual goals, achievement and rewards.

Tip number 1

Ensure that your performance review system actively reinforces the way you want your staff to behave. To create a team emphasis ensure there are team goals for all team members, goals relating to the behaviours you want to

see and team related rewards for successful achievement.

One key issue involves one word in the phrase 'performance review process'. The word review leads subtly to an over emphasis on the past when it comes to the structuring of the process. This backwards-looking preoccupation is further strengthened when the review timetable becomes annual or at best biannual. This typically forces all the good and bad elements of an individual's performance into 1 or 2 meetings at most. All the preparation focus and effort from the appraiser and appraisee then revolves around trying to 'negotiate' what an accurate picture of the past should be. And why not, usually an appraisee's future disposable income rests on their ability to establish the most favourable impression possible of their contribution over the review period. More often than not so much time is spent on reviewing that critical forward planning, goal setting and alignment of effort is rushed or worse forgotten altogether.

Tip number 2

Ensure that your policy, process and forms are dominated by the forward planning elements. If your HR department must quality check anything then they must ensure that the forward planning elements are done thoroughly and well. If they too are focussed on the backwards review then their behaviour is reinforcing the wrong things.

One consistent criticism emanating from HR departments is that there is little or inconsistent commitment throughout the organisation towards the performance review system. If the staff and managers are consistently resistant and frequently non-compliant to the system then there is something more fundamentally wrong that is

not being addressed by the moans of the HR department. If the staff and managers are complaining that the system is unwieldy and unworkable they just might be right. At that point it's time for a fundamental change not a superficial review.

Tip number 3

Ensure that your system compliments the natural flow of contact between managers and their teams. Ensuring that the system is complimentary rather than just adding extra burden will increase participation and acceptance of the review systems greatly.

One observational tip I would like to offer the England manager is related to his insistence that he never raise his voice or demonstrate annoyance. He is missing one of the fundamental motivational points about dealing with people. Different people like to be treated in different ways and some of his team will prefer the 'kick up the backside' approach whilst others thrive on the democratic coaching style. In resisting changing his style he may not have lost the dressing room but he is not getting the best out of all his players. The lessons for line managers in performance reviews are that some members of your team respond to the carrot and some to the stick. Part of your salary is so that you are able to determine which style to use, with which person and when.

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