

How to... improve appraisals

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Often, appraisals rarely seem to achieve the improvements they're supposed to. And it's been a problem for HR because traditional solutions don't always seem to work. But it's the organisations that achieve changes in performance and productivity that survive.

No one (including us) has a complete answer, but here are some solutions to consider.

Set standards, not the process

When line managers don't do things well, HR's response has often been to provide more structure, more process, more paperwork. It's meant to be helpful, but often created appraisals that ask about competencies, evidence, objectives, and so on, actually baffle and alienate managers and employees.

It might be better to say what appraisal should achieve, and empower managers to deliver those standards however they wish. Standards with clear, attainable objectives offer practical changes that strengthen performance, and deliver appraisees who feel they were listened to and respected. No one is going to dispute the importance of outcomes like those, and the absence of a process dictated by HR puts the responsibility on managers to deliver them.

Tell appraisers how well they are doing

Appraisers rarely get feedback on the appraisals they conduct, and they never know how well they are doing against clear standards or in comparison with others. That's why bad appraisers believe they are OK, and why they continue to be bad. It's not easy for appraisees to give honest feedback, but it can be made easier.

In Skandia, the pensions and investment company, appraisees completed on-line questionnaires describing their recent appraisals, then a summary of their views was fed back to their appraising manager. That made it easy for appraisees to be honest, and every manager in this pilot learnt significant things about their appraisals. Importantly, every manager also decided on simple, practical improvements to their appraisals.

Provide tools and resources

Where people work flexibly, often moving between projects, with changing objectives, appraisal doesn't seem so easy. Especially if people work independently, rarely supervised by their manager. But there are some things we can do.



Multi-source assessments can be one way. In Wyeth Consumer Healthcare, 360 feedback reports were shared and discussed in appraisals throughout the organisation, which was believed to have enhanced their annual appraisal.

Another difficulty for appraisers is thinking of ways to improve people's skills and performance. Managers are no better at that than HR is at producing great technical ideas for finance or IT! So, why not give managers a library of personal development ideas from which they can construct practical action plans for their people? That's easy to do, and it will be used and valued by line managers.

Work out what works for you

Genuinely tailoring things to the organisation's aims, people and resources always works well. Isolated, stand-alone projects, however, always fail no matter how big and expensive. Only a bundle of mutually supportive projects and processes makes an impact.

So, to really fix your appraisal process, get managers involved by starting small, with their help to improve things as well as making the most of supporting HR processes, before trying bigger, riskier things.

Show some leadership

If HR professionals seem focused, motivated and developing as a result of their own appraisals, that can be very convincing. However, if skill and performance issues persist within HR that wrecks appraisal's credibility. HR needs to lead by example; it needs to show that appraisal works in HR.

Senior managers ought to show some leadership on appraisal too. We've seen attitudes to appraisal transformed by a Managing Director who each day asked one randomly selected person how their appraisal went and what it produced. That really kept appraisers throughout the business on their toes!

Key points

- Provide clear, helpful feedback to appraisers against standards they've agreed
- Offer simple tools and resources that make appraisal easier for everyone
- Work with managers to discover what works for your organisation
- Show that appraisal is really making a difference in HR

Further info

Peter Goodge and Jane Coomber are partners with 360 feedback provider, Simply360. www.simply360.co.uk.