

# How2 approach performance management and appraisals



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## Introduction

If you're looking for tips on how to fill in all those boxes on appraisal forms, you will not find them in this Knowledge Byte. What we are interested in describing within this Byte is what the process is designed to achieve, not how to do it.

Like so many other processes in business, appraisals can be a terrific forum for review, development and communication, or they can be a waste of time for all concerned.

Here are a few reasons as to why appraisals can be useful:

- Appraisals are two-way.
- They are thoughtful.
- They offer acknowledgement, support and motivation.
- People can feel taken care of as they're being given 'quality time' and attention.
- They also provide the opportunity for people to take a step back and gain some perspective.

Here are some reasons as to why appraisals are often meaningless:

- They are rushed.
- They are one-way.
- They refer to things that are no longer relevant.
- People lie.
- The real issues don't get dealt with.
- Fear, uncertainty, collusion, duplicity, embarrassment, laziness, guilt and sheer incompetence are among the reasons why appraisals are often not worth the paper they are written on.

## Main

Appraisals are almost always a 'one or two-times a year process', rather than something that is a daily part of a manager's job. They can often be 'tick the box' exercises that cause a great deal of anxiety on both 'sides', and once they're completed they aren't looked at again until the next time.

Difficult feedback is avoided, postponed, sugar-coated or lied about during the appraisal. A lot may ride on someone's appraisal (their pay review, for one), and yet insufficient time and effort usually goes into them. Often, a lot of managers don't want to put down in black and white that someone's performance has been under par and therefore they (the manager) will be responsible for that person not getting a pay increase or promotion.

One of our clients told us that rather than completely redoing their appraisal process they decided to 'mark down' their performance related pay levels: in other words, if someone had been scored a 4 (out of 5 levels) they were lowered to a 3. This was because they discovered that most managers scored people higher than their performance merited. It was an exercise in trying to get rid of the 'invisible incompetence' that the process colluded in.

In addition, if everything is focused on the appraisal process then you run the risk of creating anxiety during the build-up and a lack of motivation and productivity as people anticipate the results. Supposedly only 5% of organisations say they have satisfactory appraisal processes, but we got that information off the Internet, so I'd take it with a pinch of salt!

It's easy to shoot yourself in the foot if you place too much emphasis on the actual process and not on the on-going performance management. People will focus on the process rather than the objective, which is to help people develop in to more effective, better managed members of staff.

A truly good appraisal is actually an agreed summary of what has been happening on an on-going basis between appraisals. If it is

left to review twice a year, or even quarterly, all the opportunities to support and guide the employee to improve get missed. People need to be engaged in the idea that managing people – and being managed – is constant. Which, of course, is why we say, “the best surprise is no surprise” and you get to that place through day-to-day performance management.

“How am I doin’?”

Ex-New York City Mayor, Ed Koch used to ask that question all the time during his term in office. To us, that sums up the purpose of Performance Management: to let people know how they’re doing, give them useful feedback and ensure they are working as effectively as possible.

With good performance management, a person’s day-to-day effectiveness is what is being looked at. Specific goals are agreed, workload determined and expectations set. That way, people can feel supported and looked after by their line manager and any apparent or potential difficulties can be dealt with as they occur.

When people are well managed they feel aligned, committed, on board and motivated. Their needs and wants are being considered; their quirks and individual ways of working are being accommodated; their contributions are being acknowledged.

That’s the way it’s supposed to work, at any rate.

What tends to happen, more often than not, that undermines day-to-day performance management, is one or both of two things.

The first is that thanks, praise and acknowledgement simply aren’t given for the routine stuff that people do day in and day out. Just about everyone we’ve encountered (ourselves included) thrives on even a little bit of appreciation. When it’s withheld people feel undervalued and demotivated.

Indeed, we recently worked with one manager who said that the day-to-day stuff was what people got paid for and they didn’t need to be acknowledged for anything that wasn’t above and beyond - we didn’t agree!

In some organisations managers believe (sometimes rightly, sometimes not), that performance management is for the underachievers or for the people that the ‘management’ want to get rid of.

However, if you take the attitude that everyone you come into contact with in your job (including those above you in the hierarchy) needs some form of performance management, you can’t really go wrong.

Every day, find something positive to say to everyone who works with and around you. This can be as simple as thanking someone for making a cracking cup of tea, to celebrating the meeting of an important deadline. It doesn’t have to be big, but it does have to be regular. It shows you’ve noticed what someone has done and then taken time to acknowledge it.

We’re surprised how few people give acknowledgement upwards. It’s as though there’s a belief that either they don’t need it, or that it will be viewed as currying favour. Poor excuses.

The second thing that undermines performance management is that difficulties, even small ones, are ignored for far too long. There seems to be this fantasy that things will right themselves magically, without ever having to deal with them head on. It’s a bit like a child covering its eyes and saying, “You can’t see me!”

We know most people don’t particularly like confrontation, but if something isn’t working well, the earlier it’s addressed, the sooner it can be righted. To use some psychotherapy jargon here, avoidance and denial seem to be rife in some organisations. It really does help if people know when there’s a problem or difficulty. It can be dealt with quickly and the appropriate support can be given. Otherwise, amazingly, they grow (the problems, not the people). They do not go away of their own accord.

What goes along with this is that once you do go to someone with your complaint (five months down the road), they have every right to come back at you with: “How am I supposed to know there’s a problem if you haven’t told me?” You see, a lot of us really do believe that if we see there’s a difficulty, everyone else must see it as well, particularly the person who’s “fault” it is. Well, they don’t.

We heard of one manager who felt that one of his staff was making too many personal calls. Did he say anything to her? No. What he did do was to keep a log of how many calls she was making and then went to HR *three months* later. Talk about escalating a problem way out of proportion!

Why is dealing with things in the moment so difficult? So difficult in fact, that it’s routinely avoided rather than dealt with?

Because:

- The other person might cry.
- The other person might get angry.
- The other person might get defensive.
- The other person might accuse me of not being fair or not understanding their job.
- I don't like giving bad news.
- I don't want people to think badly of me.
- They must know there's a problem, they're just being difficult.
- What if I know they're lying?
- It's really uncomfortable.

Another collection of poor, but understandable excuses.

What makes those excuses so understandable is that any or all of them do indeed happen when people's performance is up for discussion.

Here are a couple of tips that might help:

- Take a good look at what your own fears and concerns are. There is no reason why you shouldn't mention them when you speak to someone who you notice has gone off track:

"Elaine, I'm concerned you might get angry with what I'm going to say, yet I'm aware that you're making too many personal calls during working hours and you need to stop." Or...

"Elaine, this is really uncomfortable for me to say, but you are making far too many personal calls and you need to stop."

- We also have a very simple model that takes the sting out of giving difficult messages:

***I've noticed that*** you haven't met your deadlines for the past few weeks. ***Would it be a good idea*** if we reviewed your work schedule on a weekly basis, ***so that we*** can identify any additional support you might need?

Tell the truth whenever possible. If you treat people like children by withholding information that affects them or their job, then chances are they will react like children. If people are going to get upset with the truth, better that they hear it earlier rather than later.

Another poor excuse we've heard is: "I don't have the time."

We know just how pressured most people's day-to-day jobs are; but we also know that enormous amounts of time and energy go into hamster-on-a-wheel-type thinking:

- What people aren't doing.
- What people should be doing.
- How can they not see?
- Why aren't they doing it?

Inordinate amounts of time and energy also go into telling other people (everyone except the person it's about) what's wrong and what needs fixing. Logically, we all know this is nuts! I complain about Elaine to George, but never to Elaine. I'm looking for an ally in agreeing just how bad Elaine is, rather than really looking for good advice on how to deal with her.

So look at it this way. If you deal with things in the moment (or relatively soon after the 'moment') then you won't be spending all that time on your hamster wheel. You also won't be spending huge amounts of time worrying about how the other person is going to react when you do get around to telling them. You won't involve other people, who quite simply, don't need to know.

Here's a final challenging exercise:

- Think of the person you relate best to on your team. Make a list of all the praise and acknowledgement you could give them. Notice how easy it is to do this.
- Next, think of the person you find most difficult to manage or work with. Now make a list of all the praise and acknowledgement you could give them. Notice how your mind immediately goes to what's wrong with them, where they could improve, what they didn't do that they should have.

If you can crack this one and give even the difficult ones lots of praise, telling them where they need to improve and develop becomes much easier.

## Conclusion

Appraisals can't work without effective performance management. Our rule of thumb is: if you aren't doing day-to-day performance management, you can't really give someone a worthwhile appraisal.

Give praise, deal with difficulties as they arise, let people know if the goal posts have changed (they inevitably do in any working environment) and don't complain about your people to others behind their backs.

That's good performance management. Mostly it's straightforward common sense. It will take some effort but if followed, it really can make work a far better place to be.

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