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Performance Appraisals: Solving Tough Challenges

By Dick Grote

Find out how to handle appraisals in some of the most difficult situations.

Most of the time, performance appraisal works like it should. Rater and ratee talk about how the past year has gone. They discuss aspects of performance that require both commendation and correction. They set some goals for the upcoming year and end up with better insights into each other's views and expectations.

But, what do you do, for example, when the subordinate is geographically removed from the manager, making data-collection laborious? What happens when the appraisee is more technically knowledgeable than the boss? Or when the person on the receiving end of the evaluation is years older than the appraiser or is making more money? What do you do when the appraisee is just doing a flat-out lousy job? How do you handle those situations with elegance and professionalism? Typical training programs skirt those troublesome questions. But there are

good answers for all of performance appraisal's toughest situations.

The Distant Subordinate

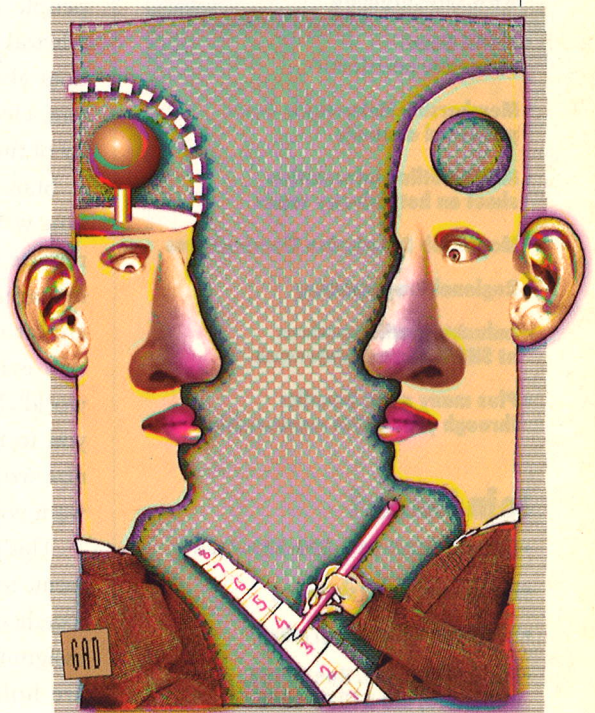
Let's start with the easiest. You're at headquarters in Cincinnati; Mary runs the regional office in Des Moines, Iowa. The only time you get to see her is on her quarterly corporate visits and your occasional travels to Iowa. But still you have to appraise her performance.

It's no different if the subordinate is in another building or even just a different office. Managers are frequently placed in the position of having to accurately assess the performance of someone they don't see very often.

The mistake appraisers make in this case is to assume that it's their job to figure out an answer to the question. It's not. Make it the *subordinate's* job.

Get together with Mary at the

start of the appraisal cycle. Explain the dilemma: "Mary, one of the challenges we face is that I'm responsible for doing your performance appraisal and yet we don't have much contact with each other. I need you to come up with a plan that will allow me to get all of the information I need to do an honest job of evaluating your performance. Over the next couple of weeks I would like you to figure out how I will be able to get a complete pic-



VICTOR GAO

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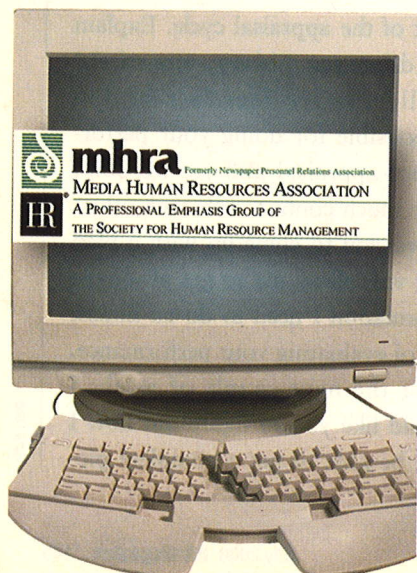
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ture of the contributions you are making." The quality of Mary's plan then becomes another factor to consider in assessing her performance.

The Technically Superior Subordinate

Janet has a problem. She was named director of the Lumumba project because of her excellent marketing and management skills, but half the people she supervises are technical whizzes who know far more than she does about the operation of the system. How does she evaluate the quality of their performance?

Start by using the same approach you would with a geographically remote subordinate: "Bob, I'm the manager of this department, but you are far more technically adept than I will ever be. In addition to doing world-class technical work, I need for you to educate me in how to recognize world-class work when I see it. I want you to come up with a plan ..."

This is a great group-effort assignment, too. Get all the team members together and explain that one of their assignments is boss education—you are holding them accountable for teaching you how to evaluate accurately the quality of the work they are producing. Don't be surprised if a peer-review process is recommended. That's probably the best—and the fairest—solution they can devise.

The Older, More Experienced Subordinate

This one's a problem only when the individual makes it so. For almost all managers, the fact that a subordinate is older or younger or a different religion or shoe size is irrelevant. Age,

religion and shoe size don't correlate with performance, and that's the only thing the appraiser needs to be concerned with.

But appraisers sometimes inappropriately defer to the individual who has been around for many years—the old-timer who years ago bounced the CEO on his knee when the company's founder brought him to the office as a 3-year-old. True, longevity and organizational memory are virtues, but performance is what counts in performance appraisal.

The best way to deal with the highly experienced individual is to get right to the point at the start of the appraisal discussion: "Frank, you've been through this drill many times before. Let's not waste any time on small talk. How do you think your department compares with where it was last year?" Then shut up and listen, and proceed as you would with anybody else.

The Highly Compensated Individual

It was a sales manager who brought this dilemma up: "How am I supposed to appraise the performance of a guy who's making more money than I am?"

It's a classic situation: a salesman, compensated entirely on commission, ends up making more than his boss. And then the boss is expected to sit him down and evaluate his performance.

The answer is also classic—just do what needs to be done. The fact that his compensation structure is different from yours is irrelevant. He's paid to peddle the potatoes, among other things. You're paid to manage his performance, among other things. Do your job. ➡

Dealing with Unrealistic Expectations

The hardest appraisal situations are those where the subordinate's view of his or her performance is disconnected from the reality of the individual's actual contribution. Sally thinks she's a star; you—and everyone else that she works with—know she's falling short.

In this situation, it's smart to disregard much of the normally wise advice about performance appraisal. For example, it's normally wise to ask people to write a self-appraisal. Not in this case. You don't want to encourage Sally to make her inflated opinion of her performance even more intractable by writing her version down on an appraisal form. Only if your company's policy requires everyone to create a self-appraisal should you do it in this situation. Otherwise, yours should be the only written document.

Another wise way to increase performance appraisal efficiency is to give subordinates a copy of their appraisal to read an hour or so before the discussion. This reduces the usual initial defensiveness. Disregard this piece of good advice when you are evaluating a non-contributor. Instead, wait until the person is actually sitting in your office before you give her the appraisal to read. You need to break the bad news face-to-face at the exact moment you are going to discuss it. Forewarned is forearmed—and you don't want to forearm a marginal performer.

And just how should you break the bad news? Bluntness here is a virtue: "Come in, Sally, and sit

down. I have some bad news for you. I have your performance appraisal here, and quite frankly, it isn't very good. I'd like you to read it, and then let's talk about where we go from here ..."

Communications gurus proclaim the importance of setting the proper tone for any meeting, and they are right. Starting the meeting with the words "I have some bad news for you" will set precisely the proper tone for this meeting. Before reading a word, she will immediately comprehend that her performance is not to your satisfaction.

Don't get your hopes up that Sally will read all the unpleasantly accurate things you have written about her and immediately vow to change her ways. She may ultimately do that, but there will be some struggle along the way.

Defensiveness comes in two flavors: fight and flight. The fight response is the easiest to spot. Sally raises her voice, pounds the desk and points her finger. Or she will fold her arms across her chest and stare. Either way, it's her fight reaction that has been triggered.

Flight is the more difficult defensive reaction to pick up. Sally looks away or turns away. Instead of shouts or silence, her vocal response simply diminishes. She becomes quieter and speaks more slowly than usual. She changes the subject and asks for less information than you might reasonably expect.

A telltale sign of a flight reaction is premature agreement. Too often, though, managers accept hasty agreements and fail to make sure the message has been fully received.

Her abrupt agreement isn't genuine or sincere; it's a mechanism she's using to bring this distressing situation to an end and get away.

The best strategy for dealing with defensiveness is first to recognize that it's a normal human reaction. Second, allow her to vent and listen carefully to what she's saying. Then agree with whatever she says. Agreement is an incredibly powerful weapon. Agree with anything she says that is factually accurate. Agree that reasonable people may see things differently. Agree with her right to have her own point of view. People can't argue with people who agree with them.

Next, restate her position. Say something like, "If I understand what you're saying, Sally, you feel that ..." Many times, just having someone accurately hear what she is concerned with is sufficient to make her defensiveness vanish.

Then, acknowledge her feelings by using exactly that word: "If I'm understanding you correctly, you feel hurt" or "angry" or "disappointed" or "betrayed." Finally, ask for more information on her point of view.

Dealing with Discussion Difficulties

Pauses are silences, and silences make us feel awkward. If the ratee doesn't answer a question promptly, it may be because the person is uncomfortable or doesn't know what to say. It may also be a manipulative power play. Ask a question and wait. When your anxiety level rises to the point where you have to say something to break the silence, simply ask, "Do I need

AUGUSTA HOPKINS
HAS IT.



BUT DOESN'T
KNOW IT.

Augusta Hopkins has been going through lots of physical changes lately. She thinks she's just getting on in years. Truth is, Augusta has diabetes. The problem is, she doesn't know it.

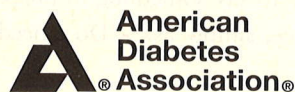
Just like 8 million other Americans. And you could be one of them. If you're over 45, underactive, overweight and have a family history of diabetes

like Augusta, call the American Diabetes

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to repeat the question?" That will surely provoke a response.

Excuses are the most common discussion difficulty. The reason we find them so difficult is that we typically deal with them so badly. We foolishly argue with the merits of the excuse, and by doing so, legitimize it.

While it may not be a conscious choice, any time a person offers an excuse for poor performance, he is trying to absolve himself of personal responsibility. Our response needs to focus, then, not on the excuse but on the issue of personal responsibility. Agree with the fact of the excuse: "I agree, Mark. Having deadlines that frequently change in the middle of a project does make your work difficult." Then put the responsibility back where it belongs: "And as we have discussed before, changing deadlines is a fact of life in our business. How are you planning to handle that challenge so that you can make sure that your projects are always ready when they're needed?"

Staying on Track

A final discussion dilemma appraisers confront is the irrelevancy trap. All of a sudden, in the middle of a discussion, you realize that the subject you are talking about has nothing to do with the core issue of the appraisee's performance.

When you discover that you are in the middle of an active discussion of an irrelevant topic, the technique to use is "dismiss and redirect." Wait until your counterpart pauses for breath, and then say, "Mark, as far as the way they used to handle this

situation in your old company is concerned, I'd like to talk about that separately. First, I need for you to agree that you will let me know any time a project deadline is slipping."

The key words are "separately" and "first." You don't say that it's irrelevant or unimportant or unconnected with the matter at hand. Instead, you graciously acknowledge its importance and then, with a sweep of misdirection, consign it to the nether world of irrelevancies and return to the primary issue on your agenda: "I appreciate your bringing to my attention the fact that the attendance record of other people in the department should be examined, Betty. I'd like to deal with that separately. First, I need your agreement that you will come to work every day on time."

The Ultimate Solution

While discussion difficulties can be dealt with and solved on an individual basis, the most powerful tool you can have to handle any appraisal challenge is a clear core message.

The core message is the single most important point you want to communicate to the individual you are appraising. If you are clear on that, discussion difficulties will take care of themselves. ■

Dick Grote is president of Grote Consulting Corporation in Dallas and adjunct professor of management at the University of Dallas Graduate School. He is the author of The Complete Guide to Performance Appraisal (Amacom, 1996) and the developer of the informational web sites www.peopleproblems.com and www.performanceappraisal.com.

Grote Consulting Corporation
2591 Dallas Parkway, Suite 300
Frisco, Texas 75034

972-335-6644

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