A ranch foreman compared systematic appraisal to a seatbelt: it is good for him but does not feel good, so he is reluctant to use it. But appraising employee performance need not be a dreaded task. Appraisals can be structured and carried out in ways that make them more or less useful and enjoyable.

Structuring Appraisal Systems

There are three major decisions to make when structuring a performance appraisal system: (l) who appraises, (2) when to appraise, and (3) what and how to measure. Good answers to these three questions are not the same in every case. Choices on these three issues ought to relate back to what the performance appraisal is intended to achieve. An appraisal used predominantly to produce information for administrative decisions would focus on evaluation of past performance through rating and ranking procedures, with the appraiser acting as a judge and the appraised as a passive recipient. If designed primarily as an aid to development and improved performance, however, the appraisal would focus on the future and tend to be more ongoing or stepwise in nature; the appraiser would act more as a coach or guide and the appraised as an active learner and planner.

Although structured planning and review sessions with individual employees can lead to better performance, less turnover and greater satisfaction in the work place, too often they do nothing of the sort, as workers and supervisors alike treat them as just a formality to endure. At the very worst, performance appraisals erode relationships, create hard feelings, and decrease morale. One tractor driver describes his review sessions as "the worst day of the year. My manager sits there and tells me 'you didn't do this,' 'you didn't do that.' I leave feeling completely demoralized."

These techniques may help to get the most out of a planning and review session:

- Start off on the right foot—put emphasis on clarifying expectations and planning first and evaluate later.
- If you use a form, tailor it to the job—most stock forms are too general and trait-based.
- Ask employees to work with you in setting goals—supervisors need to do as much listening as talking.
- Approach the session more as a coach, counselor, and developer than as an evaluator.
- Separate planning and review from discipline. Address problem incidents when they occur, rather than putting off discipline to a planning and review session.