

relationship is of long duration or close involvement. These views are perhaps best incorporated into formal supervisory appraisals.

When to Appraise

Among the factors to consider when deciding on the timing of performance appraisal are the newness of the employee to the organization, the size of the organization, and the nature of the work performed. Official appraisals can be made at the end of a project, at some set frequency (once or twice per year seems most common), or at random. (For the record, random performance appraisals have given appraisals a bad name in many quarters.)

“Too many businesses and supervisors use official performance evaluations to avoid the responsibility of maintaining effective communication with their employees. This may sound old-fashioned, but part of being a good supervisor is maintaining a day-to-day relationship in which employees get information about their worth, successes, and shortcomings on an ongoing basis, and in which they receive encouragement, support, and challenges. A system of formal written evaluations often subverts this kind of communication. Good personal working relationships cannot be reduced to formulas and procedures.”



Meaningful performance appraisals ought to occur very often, perhaps even daily or weekly. The once-per-year interview goes best when it is the ceremony at which the content of ongoing communication is reviewed. Ideally, there are no surprises in this session. A major problem in traditional appraisal processes is that many foremen and crew leaders figure that completing their periodic form and perfunctory delivery to employees absolves them from responsibility for good day-to-day communication.

What to Measure

There are three basic measurement options, and they are not equally useful: (1) traits—such as friendliness, strength, and mechanical skill, (2) results—such as new contracts written, calf mortality, acreage of trees pruned, and annual maintenance expense, and (3) observable behaviors—such as shears sheep, greets customers, learns content of related jobs, and fixes machines.

Although trait measures are often used in evaluation, they are seldom valid as measures of performance and do not serve performance appraisal purposes very well. The real question in evaluation is whether good performance occurred, regardless of ability.

The question is whether good performance has occurred.

Results are appealing as appraisal measures, because they appear to represent “the bottom line” of work performance. But for results to be good performance indicators, they need to be identifiable as a reflection of the appraised employee’s work, and rarely are results not affected by external factors such as the market, general economic conditions, the quality of supplies, and the work of others in the organization.

Another drawback to using measures of work results in a performance appraisal is that they do not provide guidance for improvement and development. Simply being informed that mastitis is raging in the herd, you lost three contracts, you spent twice as much on maintenance, or you struck out in a ball game does you little good and usually presents little surprise. Most employees whose work is clearly reflected in results already know what those results are. What they really need is some information about why they achieved the results they did and what to do differently in the future in order to improve upon them.

For all the reasons indicated above, and because performance **is** essentially behavior, most personnel management professionals favor appraising performance in terms of observable behaviors.

Better Instruments for More Useful Appraisals

Perhaps the single most common defect in performance appraisal systems is weakness of the measuring instrument. All too often the instrument, or rating form, focuses on areas other than work performance and therefore increases the opportunities for rater biases to operate.

The appraisal instrument is a tool. Like any tool, a well-designed form is not everything, but it certainly helps. Its very structure affects (1) the accuracy of performance measurement, (2) the perceived fairness and acceptability of the appraisal system to workers, (3) the usefulness of performance appraisal for both administration and development, and (4) the legal defensibility of decisions based on performance differences or “merit.”

The Legal and Regulatory Angle

Substantial consensus has developed among courts of law and personnel management experts that the criteria of adequacy for an appraisal instrument are the same as those for any measuring device: validity and reliability. The potential price of using invalid or unreliable appraisals for administrative decision making is illustrated in countless legal cases. The following two cases established important precedents: