

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: