

Strategies for Improving Employee Relations by Using Performance Appraisals More Effectively

By Nancy M. Somerick

With today's emphasis on "TQM," it seems clear that the performance appraisal should be a significant concern for enlightened public relations management in every organization. Failure to deal with this concern effectively can sabotage the trend toward employee empowerment and harm an organization's employee relations. And, without good employee relations, an organization cannot expect to have good public relations. Therefore, it may be time to analyze the performance appraisal process used in an organization to determine whether the process should be improved — whether it can be improved — or whether it should be discarded.

In considering the criticisms of performance appraisals, it may be reasonable to expect that ineffective appraisals can lead to a number of unnecessary problems in the workplace — including:

- low morale
- irritation and stress
- decreased employee productivity
- unnecessary time-consuming paper work by an employee in an attempt to correct the record
- a lessening of an employee's enthusiasm and support for the organization
- "bad press" in the media and among various publics who may view the employee as a more credible source than an organization, which may attempt to ignore or distort the facts
- legal ramifications involving denial of salary increases and promotions, and wrongful terminations

Fortunately, there are strategies that can help avoid these problems. For example:

First, an organization must realize that employees

are its most important public. They are on the job eight hours a day, but for the other 16 hours they are interacting with other publics that are also important to the organization. Therefore, if employees are not treated fairly and consistently and with dignity and respect, they will not have a good opinion of the organization and the organization might as well disband its employee relations department because the organization's attempt at motivating employees and telling them that they are an important part of the "team" will not be believed. In other words, the performance appraisal should be a concern to the organization's public relations staff — as well as its human resources staff — because bad employee relations can result in bad relations with an organization's other publics, since other publics are likely to consider an employee to be a more valid source about what is really going on in an organization than all of the



Nancy M. Somerick

self-promotion that an organization disseminates about itself.

Next, realize that the once-a-year, supervisor-generated performance appraisal is an old-fashioned, inefficient and ineffective way of managing employees. As a matter of fact, a "bad" annual performance appraisal — which is a surprise to the employee — may be a characteristic of a "bad" manager, since the manager should have been "coaching" the employee throughout the year to help the employee develop and improve performance.

Dialogue

To avoid the unpleasant surprise of a bad performance appraisal, a "dialogue system" between a manager and an employee should be established that provides ongoing, daily interaction between the employee and manager. Then, if a problem occurs, it can be discussed immediately — not months later when the employee's performance is being rated and documented in a personnel file.

This type of "dialogue system" could permit the employee to help establish the job description and goals that the employee plans to accomplish throughout the year. The goals should be in writing, job-related, specific, measurable and scheduled for completion by mutually agreed upon deadlines. (The goals can include the need for additional developmental training, as well as plans for accomplishments in on-the-job activities.) Periodically (at least quarterly), the employee and the manager should "touch base" to see what progress is being made toward reaching the goals. At that time, adjustments can be made and problems can be identified — and solved — or at least acknowledged and dealt with.

(For example, these periodic meetings are a good time for the employee to inform the manager that there is a need for more complete information, training or for more appropriate equipment or facilities. If any of these essential elements are lacking, this must be brought to the manager's attention because it will help the organization be more productive and because an employee should not be penalized on a performance appraisal for conditions or situations that are beyond an employee's control. Thus, this two-way flow of communication can be of benefit to the employee — as well as to the organization — if the organization uses the performance appraisal as a "diagnostic tool" to identify and solve problems at the earliest possible stages.)

In order to be effective, the "dialogue system" should incorporate a valid form that the employee helps to develop and that is used by the supervisor to help encourage consistency in what is being evaluated and on how it is being evaluated. A copy of the form should be provided to the employee as

soon as it has been created, and the employee should be asked to prepare a self-evaluation which covers each item on the form. This self-evaluation could include a listing of activities and accomplishments and incorporate documentation, when it is available and appropriate. (This documentation could help make the appraisal less subjective and based on more measurable, concrete data.)

In addition, the manager should be trained to conduct appraisals accurately, consistently, fairly and objectively, and a procedure should be available to settle disputes if disagreements occur regarding how the manager evaluates the employee's past performance or if the manager sets unrealistic (or inappropriate) expectations for an employee's future performance.

Although the "dialogue system" may be an improvement over "hierarchically based, supervisory-driven systems," other options may be appropriate to use in place of — or in conjunction with — this system. For example, "self-evaluation" by the employee has already been discussed. Other options could include:

- **The reversal appraisal**, in which employees are given the opportunity to evaluate their managers and their organizations. (This could help to identify problems that the employees are having in doing their jobs if they are being supervised by an ineffective manager or if there are other problems that should be dealt with in the organization.)
- **Peer review**, in which co-workers evaluate each other.

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- **Self-selected reviews**, in which a member of an important public — such as a customer — takes the initiative in providing feedback about such things as service and product quality.
- **Electronic surveillance**, in which employees' productivity can be monitored by management.

Each of these options can be used as a diagnostic

tool, a developmental tool, and/or as part of a formal performance appraisal process. However, if any of these options are used, they should provide positive reinforcement of good performance — as well as identification of performance problems and development of plans to help solve those problems. Then, employees and management can work to-

The dialogue method of evaluation — as a two-way flow of communication — can help identify not only employee problems but organizational ones as well.

gether — in a nonadversarial relationship — toward the ultimate, positive goal — which is the improvement of the organization's performance.

Conclusion

The performance appraisal can be important to an organization if it is used accurately, consistently, fairly and objectively. If it isn't used effectively, it can harm employee relations and ultimately relationships with an organization's other important publics. Therefore, the performance appraisal should be of concern to an organization's public relations staff — as well as to its human resources staff — and should be used to develop a "dialogue system" between management and employees. This can facilitate a "two-way flow of communication" that can be used as a "diagnostic tool" to reinforce what is right and to identify and to correct what is wrong within an organization.

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Nancy M. Somerick, Ph.D., is a professor in the School of Communication at The University of Akron, where she developed the public relations major and directs the Communication Internship Program. She is a cum laude graduate of the Ohio University School of Journalism. She was the first woman to receive a master's degree from the Kent State University School of Journalism, and she earned her doctorate from the Ohio University School of Journalism. As a public relations professional, she has managed communication programs for educational, financial and health-care institutions, and she has written cases and articles on effective business communication practices.

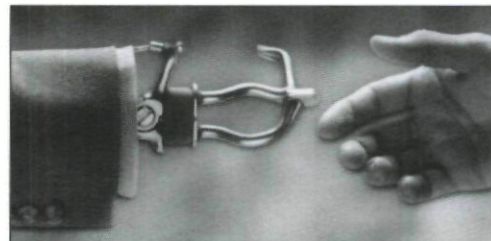
School of Communication, The University of Akron, Akron, Ohio 44325-1003, 216-972-7954.



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