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How to Conduct Staff Appraisals

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A staff appraisal is a periodical advisory and support discussion between staff members and management that fosters agreements about objectives and the achievement of targets, that can be incorporated into target agreements. This process provides the opportunity, in a systematic and structured way that is outside of every-day working routine, to discuss matters that support and advance target-oriented cooperation. A staff appraisal is conducted in confidence between the member of staff and the appropriate member of the management team, and is concluded consensually.

Both the staff appraisal and the following target agreement are recorded in a set of minutes. The first of these is confidential. The staff appraisal and target agreement may, if necessary (e.g. at large faculties, when there is a need for agreement for resource planning or an expressed desire), be conducted at two different times. Appraisals should be measurable, so that both you and your staff know when they have succeeded. In the aftermath, do not leave it for a year before discussing things again. You can have short, informal meetings every three months to catch up and identify any issues early. Prior to the formal appraisal, both parties should make preparations. The manager should look at objectives set during previous appraisals, while the employee should give due consideration to any points they want to bring up.

Performance appraisals are crucial for effective management and evaluation of staff. Appraisals help develop individuals, improve organisational performance, and feed into business planning. Formal performance appraisals are generally conducted annually for all staff in the organisation. Each staff member is appraised by his or her line manager. Directors are appraised by the CEO, who is appraised by the chairman or company owners, depending on the size and structure of the organisation.

Are Performance Appraisals Still Beneficial Today?

There is a tendency in the present day to dismiss traditional processes such as performance appraisals as being irrelevant or unhelpful. Be very wary, however, if considering removing appraisals from your own organisational practices. People have less and less face-to-face time together these days. Performance appraisals offer a way to protect and manage these valuable face-to-face opportunities. There are various ways of conducting performance appraisals, and ideas change over time as to what the most effective appraisal methods and systems are. Some people advocate traditional appraisals and forms; others prefer 360-degree-type appraisals; others suggest using little more than a blank sheet of paper.

In fact, performance appraisals of all types are effective if they are conducted properly, and better still if the appraisal process is clearly explained to and agreed by the people involved. Managers usually need guidance, training and encouragement in how to conduct appraisals properly. Help anxious managers develop and adapt appraisals methods that work for them. There are lots of ways to conduct appraisals, and particularly lots of ways to diffuse apprehension and fear - for managers and appraisees alike. Particularly, encourage people to sit down together and review informally and often - this removes much of the pressure for managers and appraisees at formal appraisal times.

Leaving everything to a single make-or-break discussion once a year is asking for trouble and trepidation. Performance appraisals that are administered without training (for those who need it), without explanation or consultation, and conducted poorly will be counter- productive and are a waste of everyone's time. Well-prepared and well-conducted performance appraisals provide unique opportunities to help appraisees and managers improve and develop, and thereby the organisation for whom they work.

Creating an Effective Appraisal Process

1. Prepare

Prepare all materials, notes, agreed tasks and records of performance, achievements, incidents, reports etc. - anything pertaining to performance and achievement. Include the previous performance appraisal documents and a current job description. A good appraisal form will provide a natural order for proceedings, so use one. Organise your paperwork to reflect the order of the appraisal and write down the sequence of items to be covered. If the appraisal form includes a self-assessment section and/or feedback section, ensure this is passed to the appraisee in advance, with relevant guidance for completion.

2. Inform

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Inform the appraisee - ensure the appraisee is informed of a suitable time and place, and clarify purpose and type of appraisal - give the appraisee the chance to assemble data and relevant performance and achievement records and materials. If the appraisal form does not imply a natural order for the discussion then provide an agenda of items to be covered.

3. Venue

Ensure that a suitable venue is planned and available, private and free from interruptions. Observe the same rules as with recruitment interviewing - avoid hotel lobbies, public lounges, canteens. Privacy is absolutely essential.

4. Layout

Room layout and seating are important elements to prepare. Layout has a huge influence on atmosphere and mood. Irrespective of content, the atmosphere and mood must be relaxed and informal. Remove barriers - don't sit in the boss's chair with the other person positioned humbly on the other side of the desk; you must create a relaxed situation, preferably at a meeting table or in easy chairs. Sit at an angle to each other, 90 degrees ideally - avoid face to face, it's confrontational.

6. Opening the Appraisal

It is important to relax the appraisee. Open with a positive statement, smile, be warm and friendly - the appraisee may well be terrified; it's your responsibility to create a calm and non-threatening atmosphere. Set the scene. Simply explain what will happen. Encourage a discussion and as much input as possible from the appraisee - tell them it's their meeting not yours. Confirm the timings, especially finishing time. If helpful and appropriate, begin with some general discussion about how things have been going, but avoid getting into specifics, which are covered next. Ask if there are any additional points to cover and note them down so as to include them when appropriate.

7. Review and Measure

Review the activities, tasks, objectives and achievements one by one, keeping to distinct separate items one by one - avoid going off on tangents or vague unspecific views. Concentrate on hard facts and figures, solid evidence - avoid conjecture, anecdotal or non-specific opinions, especially about the appraisee. Being objective is one of the greatest challenges for the appraiser - as with interviewing, resist judging the appraisee in your own image, according to your own style and approach - facts and figures are the acid test and provide a good neutral basis for the discussion, free of bias and personal views. For each item agree a measure of competence or achievement as relevant, and according to whatever measure or scoring system is built into the appraisal system.

8. Agree an Action Plan

An overall action plan should be agreed on with the appraisee that takes account of the job responsibilities, the appraisee's career aspirations, the department and organisation's priorities, and the reviewed strengths and weaknesses. The plan can be staged if necessary with short-, medium- and long-term aspects, but importantly it must be agreed and realistic.

9. Agree Necessary Support

This is the support required for the appraisee to achieve the objectives, and can include training of various sorts. Be careful to avoid committing to training expenditure before suitable approval, permission or availability has been confirmed - if necessary discuss likely training requirements with the relevant authority before the appraisal. 10. Invite any other points or questions Make sure you capture any other concerns.

11. Close Positively

Thank the appraisee for their contribution to the meeting and their effort through the year, and commit to helping in any way you can. Produce a meeting note or completed summary. Provide two copies of the meeting note or completed summary and ask the appraisee to sign and return one copy to you if they are in agreement that it accurately reflects what was discussed and agreed.

12. Record Main Points, Agreed Actions and Follow-Up

Swiftly follow up the meeting with all necessary copies and confirmations, and ensure documents are filed and copied to relevant departments, (HR, and your own line manager typically). Make yourself available to discuss concerns that the appraisee might have about the meeting note. It could be that you have misinterpreted something or incorrectly recorded it.

360-Degree Feedback

360 degree appraisals are a powerful developmental method and quite different to traditional manager-subordinate appraisals (which fulfill different purposes). As such, a 360 degree process does not replace the traditional one-to-one process - it augments it, and can be used as a stand-alone development method. 360 degree appraisals involve the appraisee receiving feedback from people (named or anonymous) whose views are considered helpful and relevant. 360 degree respondents can be the appraisee's peers, up-line managers or executives, subordinate staff, team members, other staff, customers, suppliers - anyone who comes into contact with the appraisee and has opinions, views or reactions of and to the appraisee. Numerous systems and providers are available. The feedback is typically provided on a form showing job skills, abilities, attitudinal and behavioural criteria and some sort of scoring or value judgement system. The appraisee should also assess themselves using the same feedback instrument or form.

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