

## Appraisals – the most dreaded task in your calendar ?



The thought of performance appraisals elicits a variety of reactions: from a fluttering in the stomach and a dry mouth, through procrastination to outright avoidance. Indeed a recent survey indicated that 35% of managers would rather do a bungee jump for the first time than tell their team they are not performing.

However there are some straightforward steps you can take to improve the likelihood of a pleasant and productive appraisal. The New Year is a good time to start preparing, and by the time the reviews come around you will be feeling calm, prepared and confident. The three steps are:

### 1. Focus on your intention

Visualise beforehand how you would like the appraisal to go. It's not just a coincidence that successful sportsmen and women imagine in detail how their race will be run – and won. They mentally construct a picture of success. David Hemery tells a compelling story of how he suddenly realised, after coming 2nd in the 1972 Olympics 400m hurdles, that, without realising, he had actually been preparing mentally to lose rather than win; he had rehearsed perfectly, but for the wrong result. A host of research and literature shows that the more detailed you are defining your intent, the more likely you are to realise it. That's all very well, you might think, but I just know so-and-so will throw a wobbly. As Billy Connolly said on Parkinson's final show "I think if you actually believe something, there's a great chance it might happen. I know if you set your sights low that'll definitely happen".

Ask yourself "what is my intention for this appraisal? What would be an ideal outcome of the session?" Having the aim of "fixing" the appraisee, getting them to own up to or understand poor performance, will result in a defensive response. A good productive performance review is about engaging in genuine two-way dialogue about mutual behaviours and intentions. Approaching the appraisal with curiosity is something many managers ignore as they are so focused on the "I must deliver this message" approach. However, if you hold your intention lightly, with an authentic sense of inquiry, you will automatically be far more effective at questioning and listening – core skills for an appraisal. Not only that, the spin-off is that you will obey the golden rule of "Don't do all the talking".

### 2. Involve the appraisee

Many managers prepare for an appraisal by reading the previous year's review documentation, trawling through their file of collated evidence and correlating this with the performance criteria, identifying the individual's strong and weaker areas. Some reflect on pertinent questions such as:

- What factors have affected performance – both within and outside the individual's control ?
- What actions could be taken by both parties to develop or improve performance ?
- What objectives might be agreed for the next review period?

Most however do not pay enough attention to ensuring the performer is equally prepared. How often have you specifically asked your appraisee to think in advance about those same questions and others such as:

- What do you enjoy about the job and how might you want to develop the role ?
- What are the aspects of your work where improvement is required and how might this be achieved ?
- What level of support and guidance do you require from your manager ?

In the review itself, let the individual begin with their thoughts on their performance and they will typically take more responsibility for the appraisal and be more committed to the output. You will also gain a clear idea of their opinion and avoid the mistake of making assumptions about how well they think they have performed.

### **3. Reduce surprises**

Waiting until the annual or bi-annual review to tell direct reports about their performance is a definite no-no. There should be no surprises: we all know this so it's surprising that we still have surprises! Generation Y performers in particular need constant feedback and affirmation. To them, no news is not good news, unlike the baby boomers; if they didn't hear from their boss it meant everything was fine, but that is no longer true. Take the surprise out by giving frequent affirmative and remedial feedback between appraisals.

Try these three steps, see how they make a difference!

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