

Appraisals key to productivity

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Nearly a third of employees in the Middle East have never had an official appraisal interview, according to a recent survey.

And of those that did, 50 per cent said they did not feel they had received any usable feedback, while 43 per cent believed that performance appraisals were a waste of time.

The appraisal interview should be a key annual event in the two-way relationship between employer and employed - not only the manager issuing an 'end-of-term report', but talented staff evaluating their current prospects within the organisation.

It is the moment when both mindsets are concentrated on motivation, where a salary-figure is viewed against strict targets, and where any disagreements or outstanding concerns can be discussed. It could, of course, also be the point of crucial decision about dismissal or resignation, perhaps the main junction of a career.

It is with this focus that a manager may identify why so many employees ask for a pay-rise, when their problem is not salary-related. It could be something else that makes them feel unappreciated - possibly a work underload (as stressful as work overload) or perhaps the basic error of having their faults criticised without any praise for targets achieved and work well done.

Sometimes it may even be quite a minor complaint or request, easily remedied or granted - such the allocation of their own parking-space or a leave of absence on compassionate grounds.

In any event, the appraisal interview is recognised as a key test of a manager's skill at reading human situations - and assisting if not directing them. On one hand, it may demand 'active listening' skills of great subtlety, to prompt reluctant speakers to speak openly about work situations and career prospects.

Where there are strong feelings of disagreement, it demands not only self-control (raised voices mean you've failed) but also a willingness to speak openly about any disappointments.

All this can be highly emotive, and when the interview requires necessary criticism, managers are liable to dread it just as much as the person sitting opposite them.

One well-tested drill for constructive criticism is called 'Negativity Sandwich'. You start with a positive statement, then deal with the negative issue, and finish with another favourable statement, to enable the interviewee to leave without personal resentment.

Appraisal interviews may even reveal an unsuspected talent.

In England, I once worked closely with a lighting firm which asked clients for detailed feedback on its consultants, with points out of ten awarded for every input, including meetings.

One of the consultants saw himself chiefly as a presenter, not a designer. His lighting schemes were worked out quickly and rather casually. But he set great store by his presentation style, where he believed in getting noticed through unconventional dress and image.

In fact, the points-system showed that it was the other way about. His presentations did not score well: apparently clients were irritated by all those theatricals. Yet his casual designs were highly rated. He had not realised that he had a knack of achieving simple solutions to difficult lighting problems.

Keypoints: Constant feedback

- Appraisal interviews are a key event in the employer/employee relationship.
 - Interviewers need to display 'active listening' skills to encourage openness.
 - Close monitoring of performance can reveal new insights about talent.
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