



Appraisal - remembering the write stuff

A poor performance, Teresa Ewington, Training Journal, October 2014. pp27-30.

Teresa Ewington's article unpicks an aspect of performance management that is often overlooked – the art of articulating the written element of an appraisal. A lot of resources are directed at most aspects of performance appraisal, such as tools and templates, but the lack of guidance and training on how managers should write up an employee's appraisal risks undermining the whole process. Performance management is an approach intended to motivate employees and steer their development: if a manager fails to produce a genuine and accurate record of proceedings, the impact could be counterproductive.

In Ewington's view, helping managers to write up an appraisal is just as important as all the other kinds of training on offer. Keeping a full and clear record of an appraisal discussion is an important first step but it is also crucial that the manager asks the employee how he or she would like to express the main points in writing.

The manager's use of language is key to producing a report that reflects the right tone, as well as content, of the discussion. Adopting a 'school report mentality' is one potential pitfall: 'Managers aren't teachers ticking off naughty pupils who don't understand how the world works', cautions Ewington. The written report should reflect a peer-to-peer discussion and reading the words out loud is one easy test to ensure that they reflect an adult conversation.

Using appropriate language assumes even greater importance when the dialogue 'gets a little sticky.' As the author says, 'there's nothing like misinterpretation on paper to guarantee even stickier conversations in the future.' If there is a disagreement between the manager and employee in the appraisal discussion, it is wise to produce two summaries that reflect the opposing views in open and honest language. This detailed written record can be used in any subsequent meeting about the appraisal and difference of opinion.

Managers can also use language to keep nerves at bay. For example, instead of a formal format that emphasises the official nature of the process, the manager could approach the employee with an invitation for coffee before the appraisal, or use informal language to ease both parties into the meeting. Ewington questions why so many managers have one way of communicating face to face and a completely different style when they're writing about employees; she rather strongly suggests that it makes them sound as if they have a personality disorder.

It is worth making the effort to use fresh and bespoke language when writing up an appraisal, notes the article. This means avoiding stock phrases and clichés – and cutting and pasting sections from other employees' appraisals is a definite no-no.

The article concludes with Ewington recommending that if the appraisal format does not support the production of a good written report, then why not change the format? The appraisal template itself may need amending, for example, by introducing a new section for comments. Ewington's final piece of advice is to think about personal development approaches to improve managers' writing skills – there could be a strong business case for learning a new skill.

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