

Using Performance Objectives and Corrective Feedback To Increase Competence

Last month my *ISHN* article addressed the challenge of using performance appraisals to build people's competence. I identified ten characteristics of ineffective performance appraisals, and suggested some ways to overcome these deficiencies. The two most critical qualities of an effective performance evaluation are discussed here -- customizing appropriate performance objectives and conducting constructive corrective-action discussions. The first quality is key to developing a worthwhile performance appraisal, while the second is necessary for delivering the kind of performance evaluation that can improve an individual's competence.

Defining Effective Performance Objectives

When developed appropriately, performance objectives guide and motivate individual performance. They are not general mission statements relevant for an entire workforce, but rather are specific goals owned by an individual worker. Let's consider the qualities of effective performance objectives.

1. They are defined by the employee.

If you want objectives to direct and motivate performance, then the performer must take part in defining the specific objectives. This should occur in a private interpersonal conversation between a worker and his or her supervisor. The supervisor should certainly offer advice regarding the development of personal work objectives, and must give definite approval of the final list. Thus, it's appropriate for managers to suggest areas in which performance objectives are needed and to offer various

suggestions. But it's critical for the employee to perceive personal choice in this process.

2. They are SMART.

My *ISHN* article in September 1994 introduced the acronym SMART to remember the attributes of potent goals: "S" for specific, "M" for motivational, "A" for attainable, "R" for relevant, and "T" for trackable. The common meanings for these terms are sufficient to guide effective goal setting, but note the connection of three terms to the important psychological concepts I discussed in recent *ISHN* articles.

Specifically, motivational means beneficial consequences from reaching a performance objective are realized and deemed worth working for. This is the outcome-expectancy belief described in my *ISHN* articles last May and June. Those articles also discussed self-efficacy ("I can handle the assignment"), and response-efficacy ("The assignment will have beneficial impact"). These beliefs are necessary for competent performance and are implied by the attainable (for self-efficacy) and relevant (for response-efficacy) qualities of SMART goals.

3. Safety-related objectives are included.

To make performance appraisals relevant for occupational safety, it's critical of course, to include one or more objectives related to the prevention of personal injury. These should be specific process activities whose accomplishment will contribute to the vision of achieving an injury-free workplace. Thus, eliminating a certain number of injuries should never be an objective. Instead, set goals on important safety processes relevant to the individual's domain of responsibility and influence.

4. They are achievable but challenging.

The individual should believe the performance objectives are attainable (reflecting a belief in self-efficacy), but they should also be challenging. Some refer to these as “stretch goals.” They manifest an expectancy that the individual can do better than average, and implicate the need to periodically go beyond the call of duty – to do more than the norm.

5. They are few in number and flexible.

Too many performance objectives can feel overwhelming and make singular goals less significant. Psychological research has shown that people can hold about seven numbers in working memory, so it would be unwise to define more than seven performance objectives.

These SMART goals should not be “carved in stone” but be flexible. In other words, performance objectives can be altered as circumstances change. It’s possible, for example, that a particular objective becomes less important, overly challenging, or simpler to achieve than initially realized. How are goals refined? The answer is given by the final quality of an effective performance objective.

6. They are reviewed periodically as progress reports.

Last month my *ISHN* article indicated that effective performance appraisals include periodic reviews of an individual’s progress in reaching specific behavioral objectives. That’s the progress report I’m referring to here. These are the conversations that make or break the whole appraisal process. Revisions or additions to the list of performance objectives occur in these meetings. But even more importantly, the employee receives competence-building feedback. The manager gives

rewarding feedback to recognize and support specific successes, and provides corrective feedback to pinpoint opportunities for improvement. Now let's review the basic qualities of an effective corrective feedback session.

Qualities of Effective Corrective Feedback

Since no one likes to be informed or reminded of personal failure, the corrective feedback or problem-solving aspect of a performance progress report is most challenging. Most managers shy away from this aspect of a performance appraisal, not only because they dislike negative interactions but also because they lack competence, real and perceived, at delivering corrective feedback.

As I indicated in my last *ISHN* article, most managers have not received training in this critical component of an effective performance appraisal system. Please consider carefully the following guidelines for delivering corrective feedback. They are relevant for every reader, since we all find ourselves in situations where correcting another person's behavior is called for.

1. The manager describes the problem without subjective or judgmental statements.

Effective corrective feedback usually starts with the manager or supervisor explaining the problem or need for improvement. The problem should be described without judgmental statements. It's not useful to add subjective opinions at this point. Suggesting, for example, a problem resulted from poor judgment, insufficient motivation, or inadequate planning sets the wrong tone. It puts the employee on the defensive, influencing a listing of excuses for failure rather than ways to improve.

This discussion can initiate the development of a corrective action plan and sincere commitment to improve if the problem is stated objectively in terms of observable behaviors and the extrinsic context in which these behaviors occurred. Adopt the mindset that anyone could have demonstrated the inferior performance under similar circumstances. Then the challenge is to decide what environmental factors or conditions need to be changed in order to improve performance.

2. The manager listens proactively to learn the employee's perspective.

I've addressed the power of proactive listening in several contexts, from receiving recognition (*ISHN*, January 1997) to identifying an at-risk behavior (*ISHN*, October 1999) and engaging in supportive safety conversation (*ISHN*, February 2000). My point is essentially the same here. Attentive listening encourages the employee to present his or her view of the problem and various contributing factors.

The manager must sincerely want to understand the problem from the employee's perspective. This can only happen if the employee talks openly and discloses personal viewpoints. This is more likely to happen if the manager demonstrates proactive listening skills by a) showing authentic interest through body language, b) periodically restating the employee's point to reflect concern and check for understanding, and c) asking open-ended questions pertinent to the discussion.

3. The manager demonstrates understanding of the employee's perspective.

Managers who listen effectively develop an appreciation and understanding of the employee's perception of the problem, which can occasion practical solutions. When managers show explicitly they understand the employee's outlook, they increase

interpersonal trust and mutual respect. This increases the likelihood the employee will accept the need for improvement and work on a plan for corrective action.

4. Obtain mutual agreement on the problem.

Managers who follow the first three guidelines bring the feedback discussion to a critical level – the point where both parties agree on the problem. Competence cannot improve unless the individual needing improvement recognizes and acknowledges the need. Thus, it's essential a consensus is explicitly reached regarding a need for performance enhancement. Then and only then can the next step be accomplished.

5. Discuss potential solutions and select a plan of action.

This is obviously the problem-solving stage. Contributing factors to the problem and observable barriers to solving the problem are openly discussed. Some factors and/or barriers may be difficult or impossible to eliminate. It might be necessary, in fact, to add supportive conditions in order to overcome obstacles or facilitate the occurrence of desirable behaviors.

Don't hesitate to develop a long list of potential solutions. Many may be currently impractical or unrealistic. But entertaining ideal situations and optimal competence can lead to creative solutions. Select the best action plan for now, but recognize that a more optimal solution may be possible in the future.

6. The employee summarizes the plan for corrective action.

Often a corrective feedback discussion ends with the manager reviewing his or her expectations. For many this might seem like the common-sense way to guarantee corrective action, but it is not optimal. It's far better for the manager to ask the employee to summarize the plan mutually developed and agreed on for performance

enhancement. The manager listens for confusion or inconsistencies and asks for clarification or offers refinements.

7. Manager requests commitment for improvement.

After the employee offers a clear statement of the corrective action plan, the manager has the perfect opportunity to solicit commitment. He could say something like, "It's obvious you know how to achieve a higher level of performance . . .do I have your commitment to make this happen?" Most employees will answer "yes" to the commitment question, but the nature of the prior discussion will determine how obligated the employee feels to follow through.

Whether the employee goes beyond the call of duty to meet the new expectations depends on the degree to which the guidelines presented here are followed. As I discussed in a recent *ISHN* article (April, 2001), self-persuasion is key to personal commitment, and is increased by perceptions of personal choice, ownership, and interpersonal trust occasioned by the corrective feedback discussion.

8. Agree on a time for a follow-up progress report.

When people are self-persuaded they feel personally responsible to achieve their goals. Such behavior is self-directed. This is the ideal outcome for a corrective feedback discussion, but don't count on this result. Much improvement is other-directed, motivated by an external accountability system.

Managers hold employees accountable for performance improvement through follow-up discussions that review progress. Optimally, this is viewed as an opportunity for an employee to show off accomplishment, and for a manager to offer genuine appreciation and recognition. This is also the occasion for employees to request

additional management support, and perhaps to revise their goals. New circumstances may make it unrealistic to attain a certain goal. In contrast, a particular goal could be reached early and a new one established.

In Conclusion

The real benefit of a performance appraisal is not evaluation, but rather performance improvement. For this to occur, however, effective performance objectives must be created; and when goals are not met, corrective feedback must be delivered effectively. This article presented guidelines for enabling these components of a performance appraisal system to build competence.

It takes special one-on-one attention between supervisors and employees to accomplish effective performance appraisals. But anything less can be a complete waste of time, and it can do more harm than good. So my advice is to cease doing performance appraisals at all if you can't follow the basic guidelines described here and in my *ISHN* article last month. Next month I'll explain how the standard performance appraisal is biased and ineffective, as revealed through psychological research.

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