Career development—A new approach to performance appraisal

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INTRODUCTION

Ours has been called the age of the “knowledge worker.” What this means is that people, especially people who work in high technology industries, have become dramatically more important to the success of those industries than ever before. Company executives, who have long talked about their people as “our most valuable asset”, are beginning to really believe it. And that is why managers of professional people are becoming increasingly concerned about finding more effective ways to enhance the performance of these highly trained employees.

It would seem to follow that performance appraisal and evaluation is an area loaded with potential payoffs in terms of getting people to do their jobs better. So it would seem. Letting people know where they stand, identifying improvement areas, and giving positive feedback in a straightforward manner are intended to result in upgraded performance. The results, however, frequently fall disappointingly short of the good intentions.

The purpose of this paper is to relate the author’s experience in attempting to face up to the attendant problems of performance appraisal in one data processing organization and to share an approach which places the focus on career development.

We would like to say a word about our methodology. Much of the data upon which our development efforts are based has been informally gathered over a period of time. In some instances, it is anecdotal—individuals relating their own personal experiences. In other instances, we are drawing upon planned feedback sessions where the ideas and opinions of managers and supervisors were directly solicited. Throughout the process of research and experimentation we have relied heavily upon some of the well documented findings of behavioral sciences, and upon our own intuitive ideas about what contributes to productive human interactions. What we are offering is neither panacea nor an impressive set of statistics. Instead, we want to share an evolving process that points rather convincingly, from our perspective, to the kinds of issues that need to be considered if we are serious about helping people realize career goals.

DISSATISFACTIONS WITH PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

The initiative to “do something about” improving our performance appraisal process started with the familiar dilemma. It went something like this: “We think we should be conducting performance reviews, but what is happening often appears to be of questionable value to all concerned.” Behavior of managers and supervisors indicated ambivalence. In many instances it took nothing short of edicts and not-so-veiled threats to insure that the task was getting accomplished in some manner. Behavior of workers, on the other hand, was often defensive in the face of “constructive criticism”.

Other dissatisfactions were in evidence. The process itself came under fire. The supervisor would fill out a check list type of rating form, ranking a number of attributes on a scale of “poor” to “excellent”. He would then sit down with the individual to explain or “justify” the reasons for each rating, and then require a signature at the bottom of the form to indicate the “discussion” had occurred. The expectation of both parties was that the points covered would tend to center on the negatives. From the supervisor’s point of view, this was the way to get at better performance. But as the employee saw it, any identified performance problem might represent a road block to a pay raise. To him it sounded accusative, no matter how hard the supervisor tried to put it in constructive terms, and he tended to become defensive or say very little at all. To avoid the discomfort, some supervisors opted to place most ratings on the high end of the scale (“all my people are good performers”), or on the low end (“you have to be a super performer to get an excellent from me”), or right down the middle (“everyone is about average”). The result, of course, was an impersonal approach that elicited little commitment from either party. And ironically, the rating approach of the supervisor quite often revealed more about his management style than it did about the employee he was evaluating.

A further difficulty for the supervisor was that he was attempting to deal with professional people with an instrument that failed to take into account professional issues.
KNOWLEDGE: To what extent do you demonstrate a knowledge of the available techniques, capacities and limitations of your job?

COMPLETE PICTURE: To what extent are you aware of the full picture; how does what you are doing fit in with the total projects?

GOOD JUDGMENT: To what extent do your decisions and actions tend to work out well?

INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE: How well do you think you get along with people with whom you work?

INITIATIVE: How self-directed are you?

PROFESSIONAL CURIOSITY: To what extent do you approach things inquisitively and analytically?

PROFESSIONAL PRIDE: To what extent do you like to display what you have done?

GROWTH ORIENTATION: To what extent are you interested in growing, changing?

TENACITY: To what extent are you willing to reexamine the subtleties of the problem?

Figure 1

There was no built-in goal setting or career planning. There was no built-in stimulus to discuss the job itself or the individual's ideas or feelings about various aspects of his job. Instead, the supervisor found himself in the position of "playing God", as Douglas McGregor put it, attempting to judge the worth of his fellow man. Some of the criteria for rating related more to personality that to performance. Or, they had more the flavor of the production line than of programming.

FIRST STEPS

It appeared that one of the first steps was to tackle the rating form itself. Requests were sent out to companies all over the country for samples of appraisal tools currently in use. We asked the question, "What don't you like about the form you are using?" Objections were listed so that problems experienced by others might be avoided. One of the frequent problems noted was where salary discussion was linked with performance appraisal and development planning. We had already discovered that the money issue inevitably dominated and interferes with other concerns, so we elected to make it a separate discussion.

Since we also wanted to be sure that any performance criteria used would relate as concretely as possible to the data processing professional, obviously we felt we could not rely totally upon the experience of others. So we addressed some questions to our own organization. What do top-notch, productive programmers have that the lesser performer does not have? What are the significant characteristics that would help you know if a programmer was a productive professional? These questions were raised with a cross-section of various experience levels and managerial levels through a series of individual interviews. Included in the interviews were programmer trainees, veteran programmers, supervisors and managers of programmers, and in-house customers—persons who regularly utilized the services of programmers. In each case, the responses were recorded in unedited form. Approximately 150 persons were interviewed and all responses were compiled to determine commonalities. From this process a list of nine criteria emerged (see Figure 1).

This now reflected the thinking of persons who are presumably best equipped to know the job and who are directly involved with programmer performance.

We now had criteria. What more was needed? From our own experience, as well as from evidence reported by others, we knew that having valid criteria does not automatically eliminate the negative results that frequently grow out of appraisal discussions. Because of this, it was clear that serious consideration had to be given to the manner in which the appraisal process was undertaken.

We started out with several basic assumptions about people. We accepted the theory that people are essentially growth oriented and will strive to meet this need in ways that make sense to them. They are interested in work and want challenge and responsibility. We also ascribed to the concept that people will tend to develop commitment to problem solutions and growth goals which they have an active role in defining.

MODELS OF INTERACTION

It occurred to us when we looked at the traditional appraisal interview in terms of a model of interaction that the model itself violated our own basic assumptions about people. In some ways it suggested a Doctor-Patient Model. The supervisor (doctor) was in the position of diagnosing the employe (patient) and then prescribing a remedy or remedies to correct deficiencies. As mentioned earlier, appraisal discussions often centered around the things that are wrong (the patient's ills). And of course, the burden of responsibility for having good data for diagnosis and the right answer for remedies rested with the supervisor. In this role, he could understandably assume that the employe often disliked what he heard and resisted doing what was “good for him”.

The appraisal interview also tended to take on the characteristics of a Judge-Accused Model. It usually involved the communication of subjective judgments by a person who had a great deal of influence over the fate of the employe. It is not difficult to see why he would rise to defend himself. If the criticism felt like judgment, and if that criticism was suspected of being biased and incomplete, then the individual's receptivity to any plan of corrective action was correspondingly low. Small wonder that concern about salary tended to dominate the appraisal discussion.

Clearly, a more facilitative model was required. First of all, it should take into account the interest and desire of the individual for growth and development. His ideas, opinions and knowledge of the job situation must be considered as having
validity and value. A second need was for generating more commitment. Since commitment comes through full participation, all aspects of the appraisal process should be interactive, culminating in a mutually agreed upon plan for development. And finally, while some attention must be given to history, what has occurred on the job, the main thrust should be future oriented, building the future on past identified strengths.

A Systems Model, in which the participants are viewed as collaborators, most closely approximates the final design. In this model, appraisal and development planning are not viewed as something one person does to or for someone else. Rather, it emphasizes a dynamic process of joint effort and shared responsibility. The focus is on movement, from where we are to where we want to be. And the movement is not based on one-sided perspective, coercion, or reaction to problems. On the contrary, it is goal-directed and proactive. A premium is placed upon clear definition of the job situation, data gathering, and feedback, action planning, implementation and follow-up.

The Systems Model concept provided the essential structure which we attempted to incorporate in what we now call our Career Development Review System (CDRS).

FIELD TEST

To test our idea, an experimental form was introduced in a programming department and used for a period of about one year. The initial response was mixed. The process represented a radical departure from what people were accustomed to and some did not fully trust it. There was resistance to the amount of effort required, particularly on the part of the supervisor. But as the system recycled (in this case, in six months), favorable responses increased, and the quality of data generated in the review sessions improved. As people began to accept the stated purpose for the discussions and to recognize the values associated with the entire process, supervisors became more enthusiastic. At the conclusion of the test period, feedback indicated we were on the right track. Further refinements were made and we were ready for implementation.

APPROACH AND CONTENT OF CDRS

The collaborative character of the CDRS begins with the manner in which the forms are prepared. In traditional performance reviews, the employee enters the interview empty-handed. With the CDRS both the employee and the supervisor prepare identical forms, each bringing his own written comments to the sit-down session. The employee is expected to provide major input to insure information flow from both directions. The stated purpose of the discussion is to gain mutual understanding, to explore and resolve areas of difference, and to generate data for effective decision-making. Candor is encouraged in the hope that accusative and defensive behavior can be reduced or avoided.

The first issue addressed in the CDR discussion is the job itself. Question 1 asks, “What are your most important responsibilities as you see them? Explain what your job involves as fully as you understand it.” The question is intentionally personalized. What are your job tasks and how do you prioritize them? Formulating an answer to this question might be the first time an individual actually tries to define what he does. Through this process he may discover areas of uncertainty or vagueness. It may stimulate a deeper discussion with his supervisor to clarify, reshape or even redesign the job. Part of this discussion might also deal with the vital question, what is your contribution. In other words, does what he feels he brings to the job that is uniquely his.

Discussion of the job is a rewarding and a demanding exercise for the employee and the supervisor. Both parties lay out their expectations. Points of disagreement become important areas for negotiation. In some instances, the employee’s way of approaching the job may result in his inventing his own job description and the basic performance parameters relating to that job. If the supervisor is flexible enough he may recognize that while his own views differ to some degree, he is willing to modify them for the sake of encouraging creativity. On the other hand, he may discover that the employee simply does not have sufficient or accurate data. His perspective is too narrow. The supervisor then has the ideal opportunity to discuss the “big picture”. Or, to put it in different terms, he is able to perform the vital management function of removing obstacles which hinder performance. He removes the problem of limited information and enables the employee to take a fresh look. In the role of collaborators, both are working to solve a common problem. And in so doing, they are able to bring their views into harmony with the integrity of both still intact.

The CDRS “blank page” approach to job definition does not resolve the issue of performance standards in the sense of setting a base line for everyone with a similar job title. It provides no ready answer for the data processing professional who wants descriptive guidelines on job tasks. What it does do, however, is offer a process whereby job tasks are defined for each individual situation. The advantage is flexibility. Changing requirements through time, as well as differing organizational unit and individual needs, can readily be accommodated.

The second question raised in the CDRS form opens the door for further obstacle removal. The employee is asked, “What portions of the above mentioned job responsibilities do you not like?” At first blush, this sounds like opening the door to a gripe session. Every position has distasteful aspects and no one is totally pleased with everything he has to do to get his job done. So why bother? Why stir up the inevitable moans and grumbles?

Let’s go back to basic assumptions. We started out by
affirming that most people are interested in work and want challenge and responsibility. If there are dissatisfactions about the job, we would then assume they are likely to be things that make it impossible or at least very difficult to do work at a meaningful level of performance and accomplishment. In other words, what sounds like moans and grumbles may be more than that. Some common “dislikes” that might emerge are such things as unrealistic demands on schedule, conflicting orders (too many bosses), red tape, feelings of inadequacy due to lack of training in a specific area, uncooperative fellow workers, heavy demands on elements of the job that seem to make little or no real contribution, inadequate facilities, etc. Are these problems worthwhile to discuss or not? Do they have impact on performance and professional development or are they trivial? We believe they are part of the data gathering/fact finding step essential to a true systems approach.

To be sure the supervisor does not always have it within his power to remove every obstacle impinging on employee performance. (And it might be added, neither does the employee expect him to be superperson.) On the other hand, the supervisor may be operating with a “skeewed deck” if he is not fully appreciative of how the employee perceives his own situation, whether that perception is accurate or not. It is conceivable that some of the obstacles may go away simply by exposing them. For example, what the employee sees as unrealistic demands on schedule may be the result of confused priorities which his supervisor can help straighten out. In some cases, an obstacle might be converted into a challenge by raising the question, “How can we overcome this?” Receiving the support and interest of his supervisor may be all it takes to help the employee tackle the problem, with the potential payoff of higher performance effort. In those cases where an obstacle cannot be removed or reduced, the employee’s needs are satisfied if he knows that his supervisor will go to bat for him on other problems that can be handled.

The next discussion question which the CDR form confronts is the concern for growth and development within the context of the current job. “What additional responsibilities would you like to include with those you now have?” At issue here is maximizing the individual’s contribution and utilizing as fully as possible the talents, skills and abilities which he brings to the job. For some it may be the opportunity to “manage” more of their work. For others, it may be more interface with outside clients. In any event, it begins to focus on the career interests the individual would like to pursue. It also begins to suggest the kinds of developmental activities and plans appropriate for joint consideration.

There is an interesting sideline to the question on additional responsibilities. It has to do with a useful distinction between two types of motivation. An employee may be considered motivated if he wants to do a good job, at least good enough to stay out of trouble or to be recognized as a “steady performer”. He manages to remain reasonably safe from criticism and, therefore, reasonably safe so far as job security is concerned. A second type of motivation is reflected in the individual who tries to accomplish beyond safe levels. He is a risk-taker, who extends himself to produce at a high level over a period of time.

The CDRS attempts to cultivate a climate that reduces the concern for safety. If there is clear understanding of the job and the nature of the individual’s contribution by management and the employee, serious efforts to remove obstacles to performance, along with exploration of ways to enhance his worth to himself and the organization, then there is likely to be more expressed interest to tackle new tasks and new challenges. Employees will learn to take risks because they will see this as the way to goal attainment and career satisfaction.

Questions four and five of the CDRS form turn attention to accomplishments and feelings about past performance. “What job related things have you done well?” and “What job related things have you done least well?” By this point in the development review discussion, a good foundation has been established for having an open exchange on identifiable strengths and weaknesses in the way job responsibilities have been carried out. It is important to note, however, that this “backward look” is not designed to produce a “grade” or to assign a rating. Rather, it is to be viewed as part of data-gathering which leads to action planning. (When we present the CDRS to our management people in training sessions, we emphasize this by referring to the entire CDRS form as a “worksheet” to assist with career planning and goal setting.)

Example of the kinds of questions that have grown out of these areas include the following: Which job related activities have given a special sense of accomplishment? To what extent was the good performance due to skills and abilities, and to what extent was it due to determination and hard work? In the case of the job related things done least well, what were the expectations that were not met? Are these expectations realistic, or should efforts be concentrated in areas more appropriate to the individual’s interests and abilities? What involvements are considered important that are not listed among the job responsibilities? If so, should they be?

Reference has already been made to the list of criteria which was developed to aid in the assessment of the way the data processing professional operates on a day-to-day basis. The CDRS form asks for commentary on each item. What, for example, is the behavioral evidence that demonstrates his interpersonal competence? Or, in what ways do his decisions indicate the presence or lack of good judgment?

It might be argued that the list of criteria are subjective factors for which there are no clearly definitive standards. The authors agree. For this reason, no numerical or adjectival check list appears in the form. At the same time, we believe the criteria point to important areas of behavior which are observable and which do impact work effectiveness and professionalism. We are asking the individual to look at what he has accomplished and to think about what has helped with that accomplishment. For example, technical skills may be in place, but a programmer’s ability to contribute is dependent in a significant way upon his use of interpersonal skills, initiative, the exercise of good judgment, etc. Conversely, we are asking the individual to assess those things that have blocked or hindered his professional effectiveness and to consider how
and where he wants to grow if he is to move forward in the attainment of his career goals. What are his development needs? What can he do over a period of time that will satisfy those needs?

Action planning is the subject of the final section of the CDRS form. The question introducing this section is deliberately phrased, “What do you plan to do to build on your strengths, enhance your skills or increase your effectiveness?” Emphasis, obviously, is on making the most of what the individual has going for him. Here we concur with management consultant Peter Drucker, who advocates utilizing a person’s performance strengths and neutralizing his weaknesses. What has he done well? What, therefore, is he likely to do well? And, what does he have to learn to be able to get full benefit from his strength? Again, we encourage production instead of reaction.

The “what” question is asking for clearly defined goals and objectives. This means they should be specific, measurable, realistic items. All the preceding discussion concerning job responsibilities, obstacles to good performance, the individual’s contribution, his interests, strengths, weaknesses, etc., has been a process of data gathering and feedback. With this shared information the employee and his supervisor should be in a position to zero in on development objectives. They may include such things as skill training, educational needs, projects designed for growth and exposure, special assignments, transfer to a new area, or anything else that would address specific growth needs. To be avoided are the “to get better in every way” kind of statements which sound good but cannot possibly be carried out. The form aids in guiding the planning discussion toward specificity by asking what the individual is going to do and when. A date is then established for a progress review at the end of a period that is appropriate for the particular situation.

BY-PRODUCTS

The CDRS has been in use in our organization for less than a year, so it is still early to make a conclusive analysis. We have, however, experienced some by-products of the system which we feel validate the process and strongly indicate we are moving in the right direction. For example, there is currently a request to expand the use of some version of the CDRS system to hourly employees. While the content may be modified, the elements of self-appraisal, collaborative problem-solving and action planning are things that have elicited favorable response and will be carried over. The CDRS has stimulated regular career development planning discussions between individual employees and their supervisors that were previously occurring sporadically, or in some cases, not at all. We believe that while management has some responsibility for stimulating career development, it is a shared responsibility. The individual must take an active role. The CDRS encourages the idea of joint ownership. Copies of action plans sent to our Human Resource Development Staff have an added payoff; they serve as a potentially important source of data for identifying development needs common to groups of people and, therefore, suggest training and development programs that might be offered in-house. It is our suspicion, though undocumented, that the CDRS is helping our managers do a better job of working with their people. But we also readily acknowledge that it has highlighted the need for additional training in the skills of coaching and counseling. This need was anticipated to the extent that a four-hour training session was a requirement for all managers and supervisors prior to implementation. But this provided primarily an orientation with minimal skill training. A full-blown coaching and counseling program is now in the planning stages.

SUMMARY

Changing conditions in business and society are demanding that we develop creative ways to utilize and challenge our people. We believe that redirecting the focus of traditional performance appraisal is a step in the right direction. The process evolving through our Career Development Review System recognizes several key concerns that must be addressed:

1. Individual responsibility for career development must be encouraged in ways that make sense to him/her.
2. More attention needs to be given to building on strengths and uniquenesses as opposed to traditional preoccupation with overcoming weaknesses.
3. Reaching goals and attaining career satisfaction is maximized when there is a climate which encourages risk-taking behavior.

We’d not like to pretend that the CDRS is the full answer to any of these. It is not. We know that further refinements are needed. Some of these will come about as we gain more experience. But there is also the need for continuing exchange of ideas and experiences with others in the field.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
