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Performance Appraisal Comments: The Practitioner's Dilemma

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ABSTRACT

Employees often pay more attention to written comments than to numerical ratings they receive during their performance appraisal process. However, these comments, while desired by many employees, may actually hurt employee performance. Despite extensive research on performance appraisal ratings, practitioners have little guidance for managing an appraisal process such that comments are used in productive ways. This article addresses this gap. In particular, this article identifies how comments are used, when comments harm performance, features of comments that make them actionable or useful for improving performance, and recommendations for practitioners for constructively integrating comments into performance appraisal systems.

INTRODUCTION

Employees pay more attention to comments than to numerical ratings they receive during the performance appraisal process (Ferstl & Bruskiewicz, 2000). Managers, in particular, consider candid, insightful comments vital to their development, but often complain that their organizations do not provide enough of this type of feedback and that they lack guidance for improving their performance (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005). To address these needs, companies often supplement the annual performance appraisal ratings with qualitative sections for gathering comments or with comment-intensive developmental feedback processes such as 360-degree, or multi-source, feedback. Thus, employees may receive comments from their supervisor as part of their annual appraisal, plus comments from other sources (e.g., peers, subordinates) that presumably identify and detail developmental areas.

Receiving more comments, however, does not insure that these comments offer insight or help the recipients improve their performance. Despite some employees' desire for comments, well-intentioned feedback may actually hurt the performance of the targeted employee (e.g., DeNisi & Kluger, 2000). Feedback providers often do not provide comments that are constructive. Employees may receive ample feedback only to be more confused about which problems to address and how to improve. Practitioners may be similarly frustrated; it may not be apparent how to manage the appraisal tools or processes to yield more *usefu*l data rather than simply *more* data. .

Although many employees value receiving comments and most appraisal processes involve a qualitative component (Brutus, 2009), performance appraisal research has focused on the properties of quantitative data rather than the comments gathered from the appraisal instrument (Brutus, 2009). As a result, practitioners face a dilemma: managing appraisal processes with little practical guidance on how to control the usefulness of comments or how to

help those who receive comments improve their performance. The purpose of this article is to address this gap. In particular, this article identifies: (1) how comments are used in appraisal processes; (2) in which circumstances comments may harm employee performance; (3) features of comments that make them more useful to employees; and (4) recommendations for managers and human resource professionals for constructively integrating comments into performance appraisal systems.

USE OF COMMENTS

Performance appraisal literature has focused mainly on the quality of numerical ratings, not on the use or quality of narrative comments (Brutus, 2009). For example, researchers have examined properties of rating scales (e.g., Landy & Farr, 1980), rater training to reduce errors in ratings (e.g., Woehr & Huffcutt, 1994), and comparisons of quantitative ratings made by different rater sources (e.g., supervisor, peers, subordinates) (Facteau & Craig, 2001). If overall ratings of performance are used to make decisions about employees, the focus of research on ratings is not surprising. However, given the extensive use of comments in performance improvement efforts (e.g., Brutus, 2009), the omission of research on qualitative comments is apparent. In the past few years, researchers began investigating this underrepresented area in the performance appraisal literature. For example, one of the first studies of qualitative comments from a multi-source feedback process was published in 2004 (Smither & Walker, 2004).

Comments contribute to the performance appraisal process is a number of ways. Raters use comments to explain or elaborate on numerical ratings (Dalessio, 1998). For example, if an employee is rated low on communication skills, the rater can provide context to the employee by commenting on a specific instance in which the rater saw the employee deliver a poorly structured presentation. In addition, comments may address job content not addressed by quantitative items. For companies using off-the-shelf performance appraisal systems, the comments written by raters can address the content deficiencies of these systems by providing feedback on areas of the job that may be unique to the organization. Furthermore, comments may help feedback recipients learn about and improve their skills (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005). For example, the employee who delivered a poorly structured presentation now knows what areas of communication she needs to improve and can then work with her manager in addressing this deficiency.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that comments are powerful (Dalessio, 1998). Employees react to them more favorably (Atwater & Brett, 2006) and process them more extensively than they do numerical ratings (Brutus, 2009). They may stay with an employee long after he or she has forgotten numerical ratings. For example, a recipient may find it more powerful to read a comment about her poorly structured presentation than to see a rating of 3.5 out of 5 points on communication skills. Numerical ratings help organizations make decisions easily about employees, but comments often reflect the rater's actual perceptions, even if this means that the rater makes comments that are significantly more positive or negative than the rating they make (Brutus, 2009). The employee may be less inclined to focus on the rating and more inclined to focus on the comments if the rating is used for development and not administratively (e.g., pay raises, promotions).

Comments extend the value of numerical ratings by motivating employee performance; ideally, they direct the employee as to what area to work on and how to improve. However, comments may fall short of these goals; many simply are not useful for improving performance and they "stick with" an employee in a way that limits the employee's growth. For example, a colleague whose subordinate provided him with very personal feedback – "he is the worst manager I've ever had and should be fired" – remembered that comment vividly years after receiving it. He had no context for improving his performance; he did not know to what behaviors the subordinate was referring. Without more details, the manager had no idea how to change his behavior. Instead, he focused his efforts on identifying which subordinate had made the troubling comment. Had the comment been more useful, perhaps he would have experienced a different outcome and chosen more productive actions. Critics may contend that comments such as these should be screened and not shared with the employee; but how would one know which comments are hurtful versus which are meaningful to the feedback recipient? What criteria should be used for removing comments from feedback? Without understanding the relationship between employees and those who provide them with feedback, it would be difficult to ascertain which comments should be deleted. Comments convey information, including emotion. Unfortunately, not all comments help employees perform better.

WHEN DO COMMENTS HURT PERFORMANCE?

Kluger and DeNisi (1996) found that over one-third of feedback interventions resulted in diminished performance – feedback actually caused the employee to perform worse in the future. Comments that are perceived as a personal attack rather than as a critique of behavior may result in such decreased performance; these comments draw attention to the self rather than to behaviors that may be improved (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). For example, an employee who reads her manager's comment that she is "overly emotional and a basket-case" perceives the comment to be an attack on who she is rather than how she performs. When faced with feedback that feels like a personal attack, feedback recipients may react by rejecting the feedback, avoiding people or situations that relate to the feedback or changing their goals (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Thus, the recipients do not seek additional information about the comment to improve their behaviors or enhance others' perceptions of them, but instead protect themselves from further attack.

Similarly, feedback may provoke strong emotional reactions from recipients (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005). Even when comments are intended to be helpful, raters may be unwilling or concerned about providing the comment because it could trigger a confrontation or emotional outburst with the recipient. The recipient who reacts emotionally to the feedback will be less likely to use the information for improvement; instead, the feedback may lower the recipient's self esteem or the employee may feel attacked and avoid gathering additional feedback needed for development (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005). The feedback, however, may be accurate and reflect an uncomfortable truth. For example, a true but emotionally-charged comment may be: "He is not diplomatic with other managers, and he presents himself as a know-it-all." One reason for our emotional reactions to feedback stems from our self-perceptions; we tend to view ourselves more positively than we are in reality (e.g., Stets & Asencio, 2008). We may also

experience emotional reactions to numerical ratings, but the context included in written comments make them more personal and a greater target for emotional reaction.

Even positive comments may hurt performance if they are more positive than what we expect (Burke, 1991). Those who receive comments that do not match expectations – comments are too positive or too negative – experience negative emotions (Burke, 1991). The cause of this negative reaction is that the feedback recipient sees the feedback as inaccurate and therefore discounts it (Stets & Asencio, 2008). Interestingly, this research suggests that raters who try to make their comments more palatable in a quest to avoid negative emotional reactions may actually receive such a reaction if the feedback recipient views the feedback as overly inflated or "sugar-coated." The negative emotions are abated when the raters have legitimate authority (e.g., supervisor), presumably because these sources are assumed to provide more accurate performance ratings (Stets & Asencio, 2008).

An abundance of unfavorable comments contributes to lower performance. Overall, comments in development-oriented programs such as 360-degree feedback tend to be positive and increase performance (e.g., Smither & Walker, 2004). Negative comments do not necessarily hurt performance; if they are focused on tasks, they may improve performance (Smither & Walker, 2004). However, a feedback recipient may be overwhelmed by a large number of negative comments and subsequently give up on making improvements (Smither & Walker, 2004).

MAKING COMMENTS MORE USEFUL

Practitioners face the challenge of decreasing the negative effects of comments, as previously mentioned, while making comments more useful for improving employee performance. Useful comments clearly identify needed improvements and offer behavior-based suggestions on how to improve (Ghorpade, 2000; Louis-Slaby & Helland, 2004; Rose & Farrell, 2002). While most comments are positive (Smither & Walker, 2004), very few may be useful. For example, Louis-Slaby and Helland (2004) found that a majority of subordinate comments are not actionable or useful for development. Similarly, in another 360-degree feedback process, only 27 percent of comments identified an area to improve and also provided a suggestion for how to improve (Rose & Farrell, 2002).

Comments can be improved and made more useful in several ways. First, comments that focus on tasks or behaviors are more useful than those referencing traits. Task-based comments shift the recipient's attention to what needs to be done to improve, while trait-based comments may impede performance improvement by affecting the recipient's self-esteem or sense of identity (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Furthermore, describing someone's behavior (e.g., "he needs to express his opinions more directly") rather than a trait (e.g., "he is a poor communicator") may decrease the emotional response associated with the feedback (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005). Feedback recipients can change what they do without feeling attacked for who they are.

Second, useful comments are less vague and more specific about behaviors. Vague comments (e.g., "Chris is shy") are difficult to interpret, which could result in recipients

misinterpreting the comment and becoming defensive (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005). Specific comments, on the other hand, include an outcome and tasks or behaviors leading to the outcome (Davis, Carson, Ammeter, & Treadway, 2005). This information is especially important for inexperienced employees, as these are the employees who need the most direction on which behaviors are the correct ones to practice (Davis et al., 2005; Goodman, Wood, & Hendrickx, 2004). For example, rather than hearing that she is shy, Chris would find it more instructive if she was told: "Chris does not speak up in meetings. She has good ideas that she conveys to her peers, but when given the opportunity to contribute these ideas in front of a group of people, she does not participate. Perhaps Chris can improve in this area by bringing up at least one point in each meeting she attends." This specific information helps Chris better understand comments in which she is referred to as introverted or shy.

Third, comments that provide details, illustrations, or examples make them more useful. These cues may decrease the rater's reliance on global or blanket statements (e.g., "you never listen"); recipients can discredit these global statements by countering with a time in which the comment did not apply (e.g., "just yesterday I asked my staff members how their projects were progressing") (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005). Context for the comment "you never listen" may include citing examples of when the feedback target did not consider others' opinions or interrupted others. Context-rich comments may include details about these situations so that recipients can better understand how their actions were perceived by others. Specific details without long descriptions will hold attention and will be less likely to elicit defensiveness than will long descriptions or generalizations (Yukl, 2010).

Finally, useful comments have direction. The rater should specify to the recipient what he or she desires to see and why it is important (Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005). The comment "you are a poor communicator" offers the recipient no direction for improvement. However, a rater may provide direction: "I would like to see you follow-up on project meetings with written memos or minutes of the meetings so that we will have documentation for the next steps on our projects." This comment conveys to the target what the rater would like to see and why taking this action is important. Importance of the behavior may be emphasized by explaining adverse outcomes if the feedback recipient's actions do not change (Yukl, 2010).

CONSTRUCTIVELY INTEGRATING COMMENTS INTO PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL SYSTEMS

Even constructive comments will not be useful unless they are integrated into a sound system for improving employee performance. The use of comments, however, increases the organization's need for careful preparation and management of the process; comments are personal and often attended to more than are numerical ratings. Thus, the inclusion of comments in the appraisal process, while making the data rich, also exposes the organization to potential for rater reticence, inflamed emotions, and decreased performance.

Although raters may know how to provide recipients with useful comments, will they be motivated to do so? Raters who are cynical of upper management and the appraisal process are less likely to provide honest feedback (Smith & Fortunato, 2008). Feedback norms in the

organization, such as the norm to withhold criticism, also may influence the extent to which raters provide honest performance assessments (Brutus, 2009). Furthermore, Westerman and Rosse (1997) found that employees were more likely to participate in upward appraisal of their managers if they felt that the feedback would result in positive benefits, such as their manager developing additional skills. In 360-degree or multi-source feedback, evaluators may choose not to provide feedback. Feedback from most sources, aside from the supervisor, is presented to the employee anonymously; non-participators are not identified or penalized. Therefore, subordinates, peers, or other evaluators may choose not to participate as evaluators if they see limited utility in doing so. Smith and Fortunato (2008) recommended that organizations cultivate honesty in ratings by showing that management supports and believes in the appraisal program, as well as reducing the fear of retaliation felt by raters. Although their research addressed quantitative ratings, the suggestions are especially relevant for the process of gathering narrative comments. Constructive comments that detail examples or provide context may leave little question as to which rater made the comment; subordinates or peers may be even less willing to provide constructive comments if they lack trust in the organization or if they feel that the organization will not protect them from retaliation.

Which employees should be used as sources of feedback? Conventional wisdom suggests that managers are the most obvious choice of feedback given their legitimate role in the performance appraisal process. However, other rater sources experience a unique relationship with a recipient and offer feedback that will enrich the manager's feedback; increasing the recipient's view of these raters as "legitimate" may help defuse negative reactions to their comments (Stets & Asencio, 2008).

Although most comments in a feedback-oriented process are behavioral, managers and subordinates provide comments that are clearer and thus more actionable than do peers (Gillespie, Rose, & Robinson, 2006). For example, a peer may suggest that a feedback recipient "make the team better" while a supervisor or subordinate would suggest "increasing team cohesiveness." Despite subordinates' potential concern about retaliation, feedback recipients tend to react negatively to negative manager and peer feedback; negative subordinate feedback may be somewhat expected and is less likely to elicit negative reactions (Brett & Atwater, 2001). Subordinates are significantly more likely to participate in rating their supervisors if they feel that this is supported by the organization as an appropriate role for them (Westerman & Rosse, 1997); otherwise, they may select out of their role as raters. Peers may be less invested in giving their colleagues feedback or they may feel that leniency or vagueness is better for promoting harmony with co-workers. Rather than continue collecting this vague feedback from peers, perhaps the leaders of the organization should decide if peer feedback is necessary for employee development. For example, an organization that focuses on teamwork and values peer relationships likely would view peer feedback as important to developing managers, while an organization with employees who rarely collaborate may find peer feedback less useful. If peer feedback is valued, then perhaps the organization should measure its members' attitudes about peer feedback using surveys, focus groups, or other techniques to identify why they are less likely to provide clear feedback and then address these causes.

In addition to addressing motivational concerns, the organization may find that comment writers benefit from training. Although rater training literature usually addresses the accuracy of making quantitative ratings, it seems likely that similar training can be developed to help raters provide useful or actionable comments. This training may be especially helpful when directed at rater groups who are less experienced in making ratings, such as peers or subordinates. Training employees on the appraisal process and how the rating information will be used may also increase the likelihood of subordinates and other non-traditional rating sources participating as raters or evaluators (Westerman & Rosse, 1997). Furthermore, training raters to provide comments that are behavioral, specific, detailed, and directive would increase the ease with which a feedback recipient could improve his or her performance. In addition, training rater sources could increase the legitimacy of using non-supervisory sources as the basis for feedback; this may make the feedback more palatable to feedback recipients (Stets & Asencio, 2008).

Smither and Walker (2004) suggested that adding precise instructions on the appraisal instrument itself may encourage raters to provide specific behaviors or offer suggestions for improvement. The instructions on their survey stated, "Please print any comments that you would like to share concerning your manager's leadership skills" (Smither & Walker, 2004). The organization could replace these general instructions with guidelines for the commenter to indicate what the person is doing well, along with examples or instances to illustrate these behaviors; similar instructions could be used for eliciting negative comments, along with suggestions for how the feedback recipient could improve. Thus, the rater is asked to provide context and a focal point for improvement (Smither & Walker, 2004).

The final two suggestions relate to how the recipient uses feedback. Even the most useful and actionable comments make no impact on the organization if they are not used for improvement. However, pages of comments may overwhelm even the best-intentioned feedback recipient. The organization could help recipients create action plans by indicating which areas are higher priorities that need to be addressed. In practice, recipients may be told which competency areas that are most important to the organization, but telling a recipient what is important does not necessarily indicate to the recipient which areas he or she should prioritize; rather, priorities for the organization should include the activities that contribute most to organizational outcomes and the levels to which the recipient should focus on these activities (Pritchard, Youngcourt, Philo, McMonagle, & David, 2007). Pritchard et al. (2007) used billable hours and client service as examples of contingencies in a consulting firm. Consultants may be told that billable hours contribute most to organizational outcomes, but that when billable hours reach a certain point, the consultants' focus should then shift to client service since continuing to pursue billable hours would actually hurt client service (Pritchard et al., 2007). For new organizational members or for those with complex jobs, learning contingencies rather than simply being told what is important will provide greater assistance in creating development plans that help the organization achieve its goals. In particular, feedback recipients will know on what areas to focus and to what level they should perform before shifting to another improvement area.

Lastly, related to the use of feedback, comments received through appraisal processes serve not as an end in themselves, but as an opportunity for recipients to learn more from raters.

Recipients should be encouraged or even required to discuss their feedback or preliminary action plans with those who provided them comments. This will allow the recipient to gain clarification and additional context, identify suggestions for improvement, and could help align recipients' and raters' expectations of the process and the improvement each expects as a result of the appraisal process. Following up with feedback providers generally leads to performance improvement (Goldsmith & Underhill, 2001; Walker & Smither, 1999) and should be encouraged, especially given that such follow-up can promote discussion about comments that will make them more actionable.

CONCLUSION

Comments occupy a prominent role in the performance appraisal process, but we know little about them in comparison to their well-researched counterpart of quantitative data. We still have little knowledge about the efficacy of training programs in promoting effective comment writing or the extent to which comments from different groups of raters (e.g., peers, subordinates) motivate employees to change their behaviors in the intended manner. We also need to know more about the relationship between comments and the quantitative ratings; do comments match numerical data or do inconsistencies exist? If inconsistent, how do recipients reconcile these differences? Finally, we cannot easily predict how individual differences affect the interpretation and use of feedback comments. For example, does sex or other demographic characteristics account for differences in how people respond to comments? Also, does national culture affect such outcomes? It seems plausible that in face-saving countries, the use of comments could be considered disrespectful.

Despite the need for additional research, it is important to recognize that, in practice, comments serve a useful, albeit stress-inducing, role in performance improvement. Comments alone are not sufficient for improving performance; rather, they are a tool in a larger system. Performance improvement initiatives also should involve the feedback recipient; comments may help identify problems, but the feedback recipient needs to be involved in recognizing causes of the problems and identifying remedies or action plans for improvement (Yukl, 2010). Perhaps it is not possible to eliminate all comments that are hurtful or are not useful. However, organizations that emphasize to employees that feedback should reflect a desire to help others may find that comments are more instrumental in correcting performance deficiencies (Yukl, 2010). Hurtful comments derail the performance improvement process, but organizations choosing to eliminate comments from their appraisal systems because they are not useful or are even hurtful could be losing a vital opportunity for employees to understand how their behaviors influence others and how they can improve.

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