Enabling more objective performance appraisals: A training program model of pinpointing

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Abstract

Enabling objective performance appraisals have been the aim of many organizations including years of research in performance management. As today’s business environments become more complex and are ongoing rapid change, it is very important for managers not to ignore the attention and the time they should allocate to their subordinates’ performance observations. The current study exemplifies an important methodology “pinpointing” implemented for the sales managers working in a pharmaceutical industry as part of a training program.

Keywords: Objective performance appraisals, pinpointing, managers, performance management training program

1. Introduction

Performance appraisals are critical for organizations especially considering recruitment & selection, training, motivation, compensation & benefits (Lee, 1985) and most importantly, overall organizational performance. And from an organizational viewpoint, appraisal system is said to measure and improve performance, and then help in allocating such resources as pay and promotions. Related with this, appraisal scores and how they are being distributed are important system outcomes. From a personal viewpoint, the appraisal system is a mechanism that provides him or her feedback, this way leading to rewards and certain related outcomes for performance. This not only relates to enabling higher organizational and personal performance, but also might form the foundation for employee satisfaction as

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According to Dorfman, Stephan, Loveland (1986), performance appraisals serve two purposes: Administrative and developmental. Administrative function is what we also outlined above: Salary increases, promotions, terminations and other administrative decisions. Developmental functions include specific job feedback, assistance, and counseling to improve future job performance. For the developmental function, supervisors are expected to play a problem solving/supportive role for stimulating employee growth and development.

However, Catano, Darr, and Campbell (2007) argue that employees usually express dissatisfaction with both the outcomes and the process of the appraisal systems. Apart from the difficulties faced regarding giving and receiving objective performance feedback, the process sometimes even becomes tedious. Bowman (1999; as cited in Catano, et al., 2007) defines performance appraisal as something “given by someone who doesn’t want to give it to someone who doesn’t want to get it.” Having both organizational, personal (including mental and emotional) and also legal ramifications, a sound performance appraisal system is argued to be objective, based on job analysis, and also based on behaviors that should relate to specific functions that are controllable by the ratee and that the results should be communicated to the employee (Malos, 1998; as cited in Catano et al., 2007). Secondly, they should be perceived as fair (Catano et al., 2007). Procedural fairness is improved when employees participate in all aspects of the process, there is consistency in all processes, assessments are free of supervisor bias, and there is a formal channel for the employees to challenge their evaluations (Gilliland & Langdon, 1998; as cited in Catano et al., 2007).

However institutionalized and structured an organization can be, the performance appraisal process still cannot be without certain subjective drawbacks (Smith, 1986) such as rater bias measures (Davis & Mount, 1984). Among those measures, leniency, central tendency, halo, and contrast errors have been frequently listed (Smith, 1986; Hyde & Smith, 1982). And usually, it has also been found that supervisors are generally more considerate and supportive toward employees who perform well than toward those who perform poorly (Bass, 1981; Greene, 1979; Herold, 1977; as cited in Dorfman et al., 1986).

To overcome those types of errors and biases, training programs have been known to be influential for a long time (Prather, 1970; Davis & Mount, 1984). Among those programs, many focused on raters’ trainings. Usually, the training programs were evaluated on the following categories:

- Training content
- Training method
- Trainer him or herself
- Training focus (behavioral or attitudinal)

And the evaluation of the training’s effectiveness was referred to Kirkpatrick's (1987; cf. O’Donnell, 1990) four-level hierarchy defined as:

- **Reaction.** The reaction of the trainee to the training program and the trainer is evaluated by how much the participants liked the program.
- **Learning.** Principles, facts, and techniques learned by the trainees are assessed.
- **Behavior.** The extent to which behavior or job performance has improved is analyzed.
- **Results.** The extent to which there are organizational consequences that result from training is evaluated (Donnell, 1990).

Usually, the training programs have been proved to be quite useful in enabling better rater performance since earliest research (Allinson, 1977; O’Donnell, 1990; Clarke, 1998; Woehr, 1994).
1.1. Performance appraisal training methods

The methods used in the present training programs are called lecture, group discussion, practice and feedback. Lectures include the traditional classroom monologues which require little or no participation from the trainees. Group discussions involve group participation to make sure that the content is fully understood by each and everyone. This approach specifically may require the group to generate solutions to specific rating errors or to define performance dimensions for the job being evaluated. Practice and feedback training provide raters with the opportunity to practice job performance evaluation (Smith, 1986). Among those methods, the most frequently applied are the following:

- Role plays
- Behavior Modeling
- Computer assisted instruction (CAI)

Role plays are usually listed as the most popular approach to training. This technique involves the trainee, practice the skills using a real or made-up situation while the other trainees play roles in turn (Allinson, 1977).

Behavior modeling has been defined as a form of imitative learning where trainees see a model performing the task in an ideal way and then rehearse doing that task in the same way and by seeing the ideal version of that model and then by imitating it, they gain practice and skills in performing (Creating a pm appraisal training program)

Using computers, the trainees are allowed to understand and practice the content and the methodology provided (Davis & Mount, 1984).

1.2. Performance appraisal training content

Usually, the training content of the performance appraisal training programs has been one or more of the following:

- Reducing rating errors and increasing rating accuracy
- Improving the performance appraisal interview performance
- Knowledge of the performance appraisal process itself
- Filing performance appraisal forms
- Developing a performance appraisal system
- Conducting a performance appraisal needs analysis

However, there is no single study that just focused on the “manager’s observation focus and style for the subordinate’s performance behavior”.

1.3. Managing behavior on the job by pinpointing

As one of the methods which are used in the behavior modification models “pinpointing” has been discussed very early on (Luthans & Lyman, 1973). According to Brown (1982), pinpointing refers to operationalizing those “situations, behaviors, actions, verbal expressions, styles...etc.” that belong to a subordinate. This type of operational act is supposed to be carried out by the managers and is called
“pinpointing”. In fact, pinpointing has been mostly defined as a “skill that helps managers translate their general concerns into specific measurable behaviors.” p. 23. Only after specifying behaviors the manager can start improving any situation, be it a performance or problematic behavior of the subordinate. Usually, the most common problem that is faced by many managers and executives has been reported to be taking in general terms (Brown, 1982). In the following conversation Brown (1982) exemplifies what he means:

“Duane, you say Steve is a problem employee. What exactly seems to be the problem?”
“Well, he is so negative all the time.”
“What makes you say he has this negative attitude?”
“Well, he is so lazy.”
“Lazy?”
“Yes, he just doesn’t seem to care about his work.”
“What do you mean, “he doesn’t seem to care?”
“Well, he is just a real problem employee.”

As is obvious in this very example, the generalization of an employee’s characteristics can be more and more generalized till it comes to a dead end where it is impossible to delineate what the real problem behavior is. According to Brown (1982), pinpointing involves avoiding labels but concentrating on the actual behavior that might have led to this type of labeling in the first place. Usually, labels are said to come from three sources:
1. Rumor mill: Informal verbal reports from other managers about an employee transferring to their department.
2. Usually used when the manager sees the employee doing something he should not be doing.
3. Used when a manager fails to see employee doing something he should be doing.

It is suggested that only the work behaviors and related interpersonal behaviors should be the main concern for managers. Work behavior is defined as the behavior found in job descriptions, performance plans, and organizational charts. And interpersonal behaviors should be performance related which means the behaviors having direct impact on some measurable product or outcome of the organization. Therefore it becomes an important task for managers to find those work-related behaviors to be pinpointed and then carry out the pinpointing which is done through giving specific, concrete, observable and measurable examples for a subordinate’s job performance.

After pinpointing which can be deemed as the first step in behavioral modification, the second step is the measuring of the frequencies. And as a final step, the related antecedents and consequences of the behavior is analyzed, this way it would become clear what kinds of interventions should follow. Karp (1985) in his article entitled The ABCs (Appropriate Behavior Changes) of Effective Management” talked about the necessary step of pinpointing before a manager or a supervisor starts giving feedback for a related job performance or any related job behavior. As an example saying “I don’t like your style in doing that” would not suitable for a desired behavior change. However, saying “When you said “I don’t care” during yesterday’s morning meeting, I felt very puzzled” or instead of saying “Your latest work is useless”, saying “The report you’ve handed in last Wednesday does not conform to my weekly goal standards” would be a good start for an effective feedback session which forms the basis of performance appraisal process.
1.4. Aim of the current study

The current paper can be considered a case study about a training program proposal for teaching the managers the step of pinpointing before they start any feedback process. It has been also stressed that future research should content analyze appraisal interviews for obtaining more accurate information regarding appraisal characteristics (Dorfman et al., 1986). As training programs for performance appraisals have been proved to be quite useful in earlier studies, adding another specific dimension to those types of training programs we believe would be very useful for both researchers and practitioners working in the human resources management area. As a methodology, content analysis after the training pre and post-tests has been the major part of our research which enabled us to come up with a model proposal.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

33 regional sales managers working in the pharmaceutical industry participated in the training program. The demographic information of the participants is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency(n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>86,7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Frequency(n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>90,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100,0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City where the training was conducted</th>
<th>Frequency(n)</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>İzmir</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ankara</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Ss</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40,330</td>
<td>5,128</td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>51,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Demographic Factors

The mean age of the participants was 40,330 ± 5,128.

2.2. The Training Program

The training program was carried out by introducing the meaning and the definition of “pinpointing” and why it is useful to use in the performance management process. Many exercises, including role-plays, video sessions were carried out. Each participant was asked to conduct the performance management
interview with a related participant to be his or her current subordinate. Each session was videotaped and feedback sessions followed. Paper and pencil exercises were given for pinpointing related concepts, sentences and also certain expressions taken from common performance appraisal interviews.

2.3. The Training Program Evaluation

The training program was evaluated by Kirkpatrick’s (1987) first and the second criteria: Reaction and Learning. The reactions were measured by a related evaluation questionnaire for the training program and learning was assessed by pre and post-tests. The result of the reaction was around 70% satisfaction. The following criteria were asked for participants’ satisfaction rates:

- Training content
- Training material
- Training period
- Training flow
- Whether interesting
- Training room & facility
- Training exercises (their teaching potential and periods)
- Trainer’s knowledge & expertise
- Presentation skills
- Motivating skills
- Able to answer questions and manage the discussions
- Time management
- Ability to see the needs
- General expectations met

The pre and post-tests included 3 parts: The first part was simply asking the manager to say a word (let’s say the word lazy) in a different way. The question was: How else would you say “My subordinate is lazy”? The second part of the test involved questions like this: Please re-write these expressions below. How would you say them otherwise? Expressions were statements about a subordinate’s behavior such as “You are not delivering your reports on time” or “You are not sharing your work problems with me”. The third part of the exercise composed of two types of questions. The first one was basically about giving a paragraph full of statements about a subordinate and asking the manager to re-write it in his own terms. And the second one was basically asking “Let’s say you are not happy with the performance of your employee for the last 6 months. How would you tell this to him?” The post-test was simply done by changing the words, statements or paragraph contents. Pre-tests were given right before the training program and the post-test was given right after the program ending. The training period lasted for 2 days.

All answers were coded by content analysis method. The expressions which included “examples, numbers, frequencies, or any other measurable and observable criteria” were scored as 1. These expressions were called “open expressions”. The expressions which were just labels, general statements, or non-behavioral were coded as 0. These types of expressions were called “closed”. The scores of each participant were calculated accordingly.
3. Results

The results of the pre and post-tests were analyzed using the SPSS Windows 17.0 program. For making comparisons between scores, paired samples t-tests were carried out. The results are summarized in Tables below.

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-Test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td>36,090</td>
<td>12,056</td>
<td>33,610</td>
<td>9,158</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td>2,270</td>
<td>3,013</td>
<td>2,550</td>
<td>2,599</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a result of the t-test comparisons, there was no statistically significant difference between the pre and post-test scores. However, there was a slight decrease of the closed statements from pre to post-test. And a slight increase in open statements (p>.05).

Second analysis was carried out to see any difference between the open and closed statements of the pre and post-tests, and the results are given Table 2 & 3.

Table 2. Second Analysis Results

| Measures                | Closed pre  | Open pre    | N  | t    | p    |
|                        | Mean  | SD        | Mean  | SD    |      |      |
| Closed pre-test & Open | 36,090 | 12,056    | 2,270 | 3,013 | 33   | 14,409| 0,000 |

As a result of the paired samples t-test, there was a statistically significant difference between the pre open and pre closed statements (t=14,409; p=0,000<0,05). Closed statements (x=36,090) are significantly higher than open statements (x=2,270).

Table 3. T-Test Results

| Measures               | Closed post | Open post   | N  | t    | p    |
|                       | Mean  | SD        | Mean  | SD    |      |      |
| Closed-post - Open-post | 33,610 | 9,158     | 2,550  | 2,599 | 33   | 18,571| 0,000 |

As a result of the paired samples t-test, there was a significant difference between the closed statements in the post-test and open statements (t=18,571; p=0,000<0,05). Closed statements are significantly higher than open statements (x=33,610) open statements (x=2,550).

4. Discussion

The results demonstrated that the evaluation of the training program in the short-term did not yield significant results. Part of this might be the difficulty of “unlearning past behaviors”. As the managers have been very much used to giving general, closed, and label type of statements, it might have been hard
for them to change their evaluation behavior immediately to pinpointing. As labels originate from past-related issues, rumors and usually beliefs, changing the underlying assumptions of those labels might require more time both with practice and with more experience. Given the fact that performance appraisal process might be influenced by a variety of relevant, non-performance factors such as that of a cultural context (Latham & Mann, 2006; as cited in Catano et al., 2007), we might here conclude that “training pinpointing” might require more of a “double loop learning” process (Argyris, 1978).

The aim of the present study actually was more about “proposing a training program and related program evaluation” rather than testing a strong hypothesis about the program’s impact. Introductory in nature, the training program we believe was unique in its own right. The concept of pinpointing, although not new, has not been the topic of many training programs up to date. Although the reasons for this might be discussed in great length, the fact that so many managers and executives are still “making closed and general statements” in their daily work life remains a strong reality.

During the training program, some managers sometimes were reported to defend against, reject or challenge the material in the exercises. As it was something they were not very much used to, they sometimes struggled with their past beliefs about how a statement should be. During video plays, they enjoyed watching themselves as well as their faulty behaviors, and they were observed to be less defensive when they were “physically shown” what was out there. This also proved how important it is to give feedback in solid and tangible terms. The more visible it became, the more they understood what needed to change. Although mentally simple to carry out, the exercises were difficult for the main reason of “out of habit” requirements.

We believe developing programs like this not only will lead to better performance outcomes in the long run, but also employee satisfaction and commitment (Dorfman, 1986) in the short and in the long run.

**Limitations of the study and Suggestion for future research**

First of all, the study had sample size limits. Future studies should try to replicate this study with more samples and also different industries. The most important limitation of the study was that we were not able to conduct the post-test after 3 and 6 month follow-up periods. As the content was fairly new, and that the participants were asked to carry out exercises and tests immediately after the introduction of the material, we believe it was harder to adjust to a new system of thinking and therefore evaluating. For a training program especially tapped at changing not only behaviors but also automatic thinking and assumptions, longer testing periods with more follow-up trainings and also evaluations are required. Future research should try to include more time samples and more chances for training evaluation. Of course training content can be more enriched as new examples and experiences are added to the program pool.

**Conclusion**

For healthy organizations and businesses, it is not only important to be able to track and evaluate employee performance, but it is also vital to create evaluation systems that are objective, fair, and satisfactory. Organizations making these types of adjustments will thrive at all means and it will be a very natural and smooth progress towards their outlined visions and strategies which are embraced by each and everyone contributing in the workplace.
References


