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Career Development and Performance Appraisal: It Takes Two To Tango

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Many human resources managers overlook the fact that performance-appraisal systems and career development programs can be mutually beneficial. These guidelines show how to create an effective linkage between the two.

As a matter of both necessity and convenience, organizations have developed distinct and discrete categories for numerous functions and activities. Different labels and descriptions are used to clarify responsibilities that will help avoid overlap and duplication. The *public information* component is differentiated from the *publicity* area, for example, and *sales* is differentiated from *marketing*. Similarly, *career development* and *performance appraisal* are set apart from each other.

A problem arises, however, when we discover that any two or more functions could benefit from coordination, communication, or even, just awareness of one another, and we've been striving to keep things distinct and separate. In the case of career development and performance appraisal, few organizations make use of the relationship between these two functions – or often they don't bother to acknowledge it at all. Typically, nobody involved in either of those functions gives much thought to the other.

We have found, however, that when career development and performance appraisal are viewed as supporting each other, each becomes stronger. Consequently, each is in a better position to achieve the broad organizational objective of increasing the contributions of human resources.

Marry 'Em Off?

To achieve mutual support, career development and performance appraisal do not need to be functionally intertwined – that is, they don't need to be done at the same time, by the same people, or even from the same part of the organization. They don't require the togetherness of most marriages, but mutual respect would help. Thus the two systems are separate but related. Each maintains its own functions and methods, but each benefits from shared objectives, recognition, concern, and communication.

If the systems remain separate, how can they be mutually supportive? The answer involves filling in some gaps that now exist in each. Those gaps concern the key players – managers and employees – and their roles. Typically, managers take charge of performance appraisals while employees take charge

of career development. A relationship between the two paves the way for a more active role for managers in career development and a more active role for employees in performance appraisal.

Such a relationship requires a shift in the traditional view of performance appraisal and career development. They should be seen not as management *tools* (used for directing and controlling employees) but as management *values*. As management values, both processes are the joint responsibilities of managers and employees, and both are essential to the development and contributions of human talent. This poses a significant challenge for the human resources (HR) professional, who will need to act as the catalyst bringing performance appraisal and career development together and keeping their relationship mutually beneficial.

The Systems Revisited

Few activities vary as widely among (and within) organizations as do performance appraisals. And rarely do they achieve their high potential – as opportunities for candid give-and-take discussions in which managers and employees agree on performance expectations and results. Historically, performance appraisal has been little more than a written “report card,” sometimes with additional face-to-face meetings for goal setting (for example, management by objectives). Typically, however, the performance-appraisal process is merely an annual occasion for managers to assess the performance of those they supervise and, often, to link that assessment to compensation decisions.

Performance appraisals may be used on employee “traits” – abilities and attitudes that can be listed on an organization-wide form along with ratings for each trait. More recently, some performance appraisals are based on “competencies;” specific competencies are developed for each job classification, and the employee is assessed against them. Performance appraisals may also be more freewheeling and simply entail annual supervisor-employee discussions.

Whatever method is used, performance appraisals are always manager-driven. Managers are in charge of the schedule, the agenda, and the results, and managers are the ones that receive any training and/or rewards concerning performance appraisals. Subordinates generally are given no responsibility or particular preparation for their roles in the process beyond attending the appraisal meetings. In contrast, career development is generally employee-driven. Employees are introduced to the concept and then instructed to take responsibility for it. They are asked to assess their skills and abilities, set goals, develop plans, and implement developmental activities – often with little or no information or support from management.

In many cases, career development is augmented by employee training in how to move from personal assessments to planning. But managers are seldom involved. As a result, they are not prepared to help employees by advising them about their current areas of competence or future options. Employees gather together for career development workshops, but then return to work environments that provide little if any support for any developmental efforts. In addition, career development historically is viewed as “upward movement.” Compensation systems support that view, and management has done little to increase awareness of developmental opportunities that might prepare employees for moves in other directions.

The result is that both performance appraisal and career development can be extremely frustrating. Performance appraisal, with its orientation toward rating current performance without recognizing employee needs or goals, offers realism about where an individual now stands with little hope about what that might mean for the future. In the end the employee's situation is one of *realism without hope*. Career development, with its emphasis on goal setting and career movement, offers hope for the future. But without management and organizational support in implementing developmental plans, goals may be highly unrealistic. Thus career development results in *hope without realism*. (See Exhibit 1.)

Exhibit 1
Performance Appraisal and Career Development
Traditional Views

Performance Appraisal
(Realism without Hope)
Managers Ask:

Career Development
(Hope without Realism)
Employees Ask:

What *is* the employee contributing?

What are my career goals?

How is the employee measuring up to expectations?

What are my options for career movement?

What do I need to tell the employee about current performance?

What skills and abilities do I need to acquire?

How does current performance reflect on compensation?

What plans do I need to make to move toward my goals?

How does the employee rank against other employees?

What will be my implementation steps and timetable?

Talent Development: The Tie That Binds

Career development and performance appraisal can be more meaningful for organizations and their employees when each system draws on the strength of the other – the “now” orientation of performance appraisal *and* the “future” orientation of career development. To accomplish this mutually strengthening process, the two systems must be viewed as contributing to the same goal – *talent development*. Talent development involves promoting employees' skills and knowledge and can best be achieved by displaying concern for current performance as well as future contributions. More and more, workers join organizations with an eye toward making ongoing and increasing contributions. Organizations can cultivate this by using data about current performance to help in plans for future development.

Talent development is promoted when performance appraisal and career development systems take into account both current realism and future hope. Performance feedback must be provided by performance appraisal, but with the knowledge that it has a strong partner that can add a future orientation to performance capacity. Likewise, career development must continue to provide future options and paths for future growth but with the knowledge that it has a partner that can provide current performance input. This mutual goal of talent development is the mechanism that keeps the two systems from operating in isolation. Holding managers and employees accountable for talent development as if this were another job responsibility will bind the systems together in the desired separate but related relationship. (See Exhibit 2.)

Easier Said Than Done?

Conceptualizing and pontificating about related systems, mutual goals, and better organizations is the easy part. What about the giant step that brings our vision of two strong and supportive systems down to earth? What action can be taken to implement our ideas in an organization setting?

Our method for building a partnership between the two systems focuses on filling in the gaps in each by using training and development as one part of the intervention. This approach develops clear roles for employees in the performance-appraisal process and clear roles for managers in the career-development process. Typically, only managers receive formal preparation for performance appraisal, while only employees receive formal instruction about career development. Yet both play a crucial role in each system. When they are trained to perform these roles, the systems will become mutually supportive in achieving the overall goal of talent development.

Specifically, employees need to learn to become more proactive – to assume greater responsibility for all aspects of on-the-job growth, including the growth that occurs through regular daily performance. At the same time, managers need

to learn that they have a stake in an employee's future, not just current performance. Ultimately, employees' perceptions about their opportunities and their continuing development will affect current performance. Managers need challenged, motivated employees; such employees are unlikely to be found where managers resist involvement in career development or simply are not prepared to provide adequate assistance.

Exhibit 2

Assessing Your Talent-Development Climate

Many organizations do not value talent development. Think about whether the following statements are true or false in your organization. If most of them are true, the organization probably does not value talent development.

- Managers in this organization complain about the personnel system and how it constrains them from disciplining or firing poor performers.
- Employees are compliant; they seem to do their job, but demonstrate little initiative.
- There is a lot of confusion about individuals' roles, responsibilities, and/or job missions.
- Few suggestions surface upward from employees, although there are many directives that come down.
- Changes-new or renewed practices-typically meet with resistance and/or passiveness.
- There has been a steady increase in public complaints.

Employees: Partners In the Process

Employees can assume roles and responsibilities in performance appraisal only if they are able to develop an appropriate vision of their own effectiveness and opportunities. Thus they need to be prepared-not just for the performance-appraisal discussion, but for the varied roles played by proactive subordinates.

Typically, organizations spend substantial time and resources on training managers and supervisors to fulfill their leadership roles; little or no time is spent

on preparing employees to fulfill their roles. Yet they are rewarded or punished according to their success or failure in being proactive. Thus it seems only fair that they be trained for this responsibility. This means preparing employees to be less passive and more active about how they view their jobs and how they carry out their duties.

Four roles contribute to proactive subordinacy. The performance of these roles increases the likelihood that employees will be successful in their current jobs as well as in their career futures: (1) Analyzer, (2) Influencer, (3) Planner, and (4) Protégé. Employees who can successfully perform these four roles can become partners in the appraisal of their performance; these employees will bring a new dynamism to the numerous activities they undertake on the job. However, each of the roles requires skills that need to be developed and encouraged by the organization, which must be willing to commit time to improving employee followership.

Analyzer. Employees in the analyzer role are able to research their own performance and the work environment. Analyzers can use the data from their research to objectively determine more effective ways to complete the work at hand. This might mean determining that certain skills and knowledge are needed or discovering that new ways of arranging work could improve effectiveness.

Employees who can take responsibility for analyzing their own performance first need to undertake self-assessment and candidly reflect on how their performance achieves goals and stacks up against expectations. Then employees need to diagnose performance strengths and weaknesses. This means drawing conclusions from their self-assessment and pinpointing needs for change. Finally, employees must move their analyses to the active stage of problem solving. They need to stop waiting for the manager to do or say something about their performance and start taking responsibility for correcting their own performance problems.

Influencer. Employees with this skill are capable of getting superiors to agree with their perspectives. Generally, this means that employees need a wide repertoire of communications skills, ranging from negotiation and advocacy to solicitation of feedback and listening. Without such skills, it is unlikely that an employee can assume any responsibility for effective performance.

Employees who are able to influence must first learn to challenge organizational roadblocks by questioning old assumptions and outdated practices when appropriate and suggesting new ideas that might improve effectiveness. This ability, along with informing and advising, can help to establish a collaborative relationship between manager and employee. Employees who can offer information and advice and keep the boss apprised of potential problems and potential opportunities are usually valued for their initiative and helpfulness.

If an employee is to act as influencer, he or she must learn to initiate openness in the boss-subordinate relationship by asking for feedback. That's not always easy, and it needs to be taught and encouraged; but asking for feedback is far better than simply wondering or guessing what the boss is thinking. Similarly, employees cannot always wait to be asked by their managers for feedback; employees must learn to express their needs.

It is also important for employees to learn about styles of influence, as well as the specific skills involved. Different styles are useful in various situations and with different individuals. For example, an approach that relies on logic may work well in one circumstance, while forceful assertiveness may work in another. In some cases, influence can be achieved best by individuals who are good listeners; in other cases, the person with influence may use a more expansive style to articulate visions for the future.

Planner. Employees who are able to assume the planner role have a clear vision of why their jobs exist, what needs they are fulfilling, who is the “customer” or “client,” and what goals they are aiming toward. This clear sense of purpose and direction is essential to employees’ understanding of what their performance does or does not contribute to the organization.

In effect, the planner needs to learn to become a self-marketer, viewing the job at hand as if it were a small business. For example, the effective planner will identify the mission of the job by asking: “Why do I exist in this organization? What needs do I fulfill?” Similarly, the planner will learn to understand the marketplace by asking: “Who are my customers/clients? What are my strengths? What is the competition?” The answers to these questions are essential to job performance and job satisfaction. Addressing these questions in the performance-appraisal process serves to clarify roles and responsibilities by setting mutual expectations.

Protégé. In the protégé role, employees need to “understudy” a variety of role models without losing sight of their own unique characters. By learning and practicing skills in observation and in transference of what is observed to other situations, the protégé can discover the methods and styles that really get things done in the organization. A protégé understands that learning on the job includes observing others and using them as role models when appropriate; that kind of learning requires a great deal of initiative and does not rely on waiting to be instructed.

An appropriate goal for protégés is to observe and model themselves after “peak performers.” These high achievers are not only good at their jobs, but are also comfortable with themselves as individuals. According to Dennis Jaffee and Cynthia Scott (*From Burnout to Balance*, McGraw Hill, 1984), peak performers are proactive (eager to explore, try new possibilities, risk failure, and take action), self-caring (able to relax, enjoy many different things, and balance professional

goals and personal needs), and inner-directed (able to satisfy themselves, visualize and reach goals, and enjoy personal challenges rather than imagine limitations).

Managers: Advice, Consent ... and More

While organizations frequently do try to train managers in various supervisory and leadership roles and responsibilities, they do not typically spend much time in preparing managers for taking an active role in career development. At best, managers give a bit of off-the-cuff career advice when employees ask for it point blank. Or they give consent-but rarely real encouragement when employees ask them to participate in career-development activities.

To become real partners in career development, however, managers need preparation in the important roles they can assume in the process. Those roles for managers, as described by Caela Farren and her colleagues in *Career Spark for Managers* (Career Systems, Inc., 1983), are: (1) Coach, (2) Appraiser, (3) Advisor, and (4) Referral Agent. By learning and practicing the skills and techniques associated with these roles, managers can be more effective in helping employees manage their own careers, and likewise increase their behavioral repertoire as appraisers of performance. Understanding the dual responsibilities of both managers and employees is essential for organizations that want to create a talent-development culture.

Coach. Managers can help employees direct their aspirations for the future more realistically by helping them identify strengths, weaknesses, values, and interests. This means acquiring and using skills in open communications that enable managers to listen to employees, draw them out, and ask probing questions.

Managers who can initiate and maintain this vital two-way dialogue will be supporting employees in answering the crucial career-development question, "Who am I?" In addition, managers will be indicating their active support of the career-development process right from the beginning.

Appraiser. Most managers already are experienced in some form of appraisal. To this they need to add the skills that will enable them and their employees to relate the appraisal of current abilities to future opportunities.

Feedback skills are particularly important for the appraiser-especially feedback specific enough to include examples of the instances in which employees have demonstrated particular strengths and weaknesses. This allows employees to see how others view their work and determine how that will effect future career options.

Advisor. As an advisor, the manager offers employees information about the organization that will help in determining appropriate and realistic career goals. This type of information can guide them in understanding alternatives, limitations, and opportunities within the organization.

To succeed as an advisor, managers must understand that career development may take place in numerous ways. Upward movement is only one alternative (albeit the one most popular and easily understood). However, the advisor should alert employees to possibilities that include vertical movement, temporary exploratory movement, and even downward movement – all of which can be paths to fulfilling career futures. The aim of the advisor is to help employees answer, “What are my alternatives and goals?”

Referral Agent. The manager acting as referral agent is helping employees decide which specific activities and experiences will help them reach career goals. This may mean guiding them to various training opportunities on or off the job, resource people, or new, developmental on-the-job experiences.

As referral agents, managers must understand various developmental activities that may take place in the organization, and they must think creatively about the kind of visibility and contacts that may be useful to employee careers.

Human Resources Professionals: Making The Match

HR professionals can play a vital part in establishing and nurturing the relationship between performance appraisal and career development by keeping the concept of “talent development” clearly in mind and by cultivating systems and individuals that support it. This constitutes a significant shift in perspective. Thus the HR professional must take on the role of change agent by introducing and initiating a stronger relationship between performance appraisal and career development. He or she will need to promote this relationship and lay the groundwork for managers’ and employees’ new roles and for this new perspective. Essentially the initial intervention for creating an interactive system is training and education. However, the HR person must keep these three realities in mind: (1) The *system* is the client; (2) change and resistance are *not* such strange bedfellows; and (3) the form is not the system.

First, it is best to look at performance appraisal and career development as management systems, rather than as a management responsibility. Then the “client” in the change effort is the system. With this view, the HR professional can concentrate on activities that will reduce resistance to change rather than get caught up in the training of managers and employees. The HR professional, therefore, must have an intervention strategy rather than a training focus.

When the system is the client, success indicators are stronger, more effective systems-not simply people who are happy with training they have received. The

HR professional needs to clarify this view of the client with others involved, possibly through some mutual psychological contracting and through design of models that can demonstrate the point.

Second, it is important to remember that any change will be met with resistance. HR must develop ways to recognize resistance, work with *and* through it, and establish all key players as “winners” in the process of talent development. At the outset they must undertake commitment-building strategies to help alleviate problems. For example, it is critical to spend appropriate time clarifying questions related to both career development and performance appraisal in the organization. It might be helpful in some cases to start small with a carefully placed pilot experience-and then evaluate it and publicize any successes. Of course, success criteria should be established at the beginning to clearly signal the favorable consequences being sought for the organization.

Finally, HR professionals must remember that the form is *not* the system. Performance-appraisal and career-development activities both have certain methods of operation, procedures, timetables, and paperwork. These establish the form, but should not be confused with the system. Successful integration of the systems will not occur if too much time is spent worrying about how the forms do or do not relate to one another. The key to strengthening the two systems is in redirecting them to a common goal for talent development. The form may change or remain the same within that framework; the important question is, “To what extent do our performance-appraisal and career-development systems work to support talent development?”

The challenge for the HR professional is not only to keep these three realities in mind when trying to implement change, but to discuss them with others in the organization. The separate but related concept of performance appraisal and career development is new. Managers and employees are right to ask, “What difference will it make if we use this concept?” It is up to the HR professional to create the opportunities that can demonstrate how the concept works in practice and then show how it contributes to talent development.

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