

Performance Appraisal – Developmental or Destructive?

“People cannot be expected to give real commitment to their work unless they know what they are meant to be doing – and why – and what progress they are making towards their objectives.”

John Garnett

In performance management circles it is said ‘what gets measured gets done’, to reflect that if the level of desired activity or behaviour is not assessed then it is less likely that someone would be motivated to perform the activity or exhibit the behaviour. However, the rationale and logical perception that desired outcomes will easily accrue from assessment, is faced with several variables. Variables such as the proverbial ‘it is not just what you say but how you say it and it is not just what you do but how you do it’; persons tend to perceive themselves more favourably and others less favourably; persons generally do not like to be assessed unless the feedback is positive; and our society is often characterised by a preference to be critical of others rather than uplifting. One does not have to look beyond the call-in programmes, social media, gossip columns, etc to see the prevalence of negative assessments of others.

Effective performance appraisals afford the opportunity for the superior to specifically, objectively, empathetically and professionally discuss with his/her subordinate the observed activities and behaviours that were desired; the observed activities and behaviours that were undesired; and what can be jointly done to maximise the desirable and minimize the undesirable. However, the major challenge to be recognised is that the one, two or four appraisal review meetings conducted per year do not operate in a vacuum but need to be part of an ongoing performance management system. The appraisal review should not represent a forum to ambush the subordinate, that is, to download a litany of woes which the superior (and others if a 360 degree system is used) has mentally stored up over the review period. Rather the appraisal review should provide for formal discussion of the desirable and undesirable observations, which have been shared throughout the review period.

As a result of the **Employment Rights Act, 2012-9**, we talk about natural justice and due process when dealing with dismissals, but it would be wise to remember that fairness and

productivity dictate that an employee should be recognised and/or counseled on an ongoing basis for the positive and negative aspects of his/her work and demeanour. Is it fair never to acknowledge someone's positive contributions or only to do so in a token way when appraised? Is it fair not to give someone the benefit of being aware of concerns when they arise and can be expeditiously addressed but rather to outline a litany of woes and potential negative ramifications during the appraisal?

If performance appraisal reviews are to be truly developmental they should seek to build morale and not demoralise. They should balance the positives with the negatives and not only focus on negatives. They should be part of ongoing dialogue and performance management. They should facilitate teamwork and not provide the opportunity for persons to undermine their colleagues. They should be user friendly and not overly complex and cumbersome. They should acknowledge the particular difficulties pose by the organisation's environment and not assume that things are fully conducive to the maximisation of performance. They should recognise that persons face work-life balance and other personal challenges, rather than adopting a 'that is your problem and not mine' attitude.

I am aware of a local company, which commissioned training on 'Performance Appraisal Systems for Business Effectiveness', because of a concern that the appraisal system could be better utilised by its managers and supervisors. Such concerns are not limited to Barbados since only recently in a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) programme, it was reported that international consulting agencies - Accenture and Deloitte were simplifying their internal appraisal systems in the hope of making them more effective.

In its booklet entitled 'Appraisal and appraisal interviewing' The Industrial Society asserts, "To a large extent the continued viability of a company depends on the way in which its managers direct and control the basic resources of the organisation... the effective use of the other ... resources depends upon the skill and high performance of the individuals within the organisation". When one compares such assertion with the preceding, it reveals that

performance appraisal can either be an asset or a liability. Therefore, the ultimate question is - how does your appraisal system measure up?

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