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Are Performance Appraisals A Waste of Time?

Of all the management tools cooked up by HR types, it seems few garner more outright hatred than performance appraisals. If you're doing them because you believe you should, but aren't satisfied that they're making any difference, you're not alone: One management guru was famous for his tirades against them, practically declaring performance appraisals should be consigned to the deepest circle of hell.

I don't support useless paper exercises; but with all due respect to a guy smarter than me, I think his recommendation is a matter of babies and bathwater. Managers may complain about appraisals, but their employees want and need meaningful feedback about how well they're doing, and where they can improve. In fact, lack of meaningful feedback is a big reason good people quit to move to another job. Requiring a manager to sit down with an employee and engage in a meaningful dialogue about how the subordinate can't in principle be a waste of time.

Also, any organization should have a clear picture of how capable its workforce is. The board and/or senior leadership should know who's killing it, whose potential has topped out, who deserves a raise, who a promotion, and who a performance improvement plan. A good performance appraisal should provide a solid basis for all those decisions.

So what's the problem? It's this: Look at any random appraisal form for decades now, and you'll see ratings categories like "Job Knowledge," "Motivation," "Attitude," "Relationships with Others," "Commitment to Quality," and the like. These categories don't describe job performance – they're part of psychological profiles.

Modern management was hardly "modern" before it was completely overrun by psychologists, who convinced executives that the way to success was in hiring people who fit a specific (and completely arbitrary) psychological profile. It doesn't really work that way, and it never did; but for decades managers have become so preoccupied with defining the ideal employee that they've ignored defining what they actually want from the employee's job.

Let's try this – don't worry, I won't share your answers. If I were to ask you what kind of attitude you want from your next front-line employee, I'll bet you could give me three substantial characteristics. But if I were to ask you what are the three value-added results this person must deliver in the next 12 months, could you answer as quickly?

You see my point.

If your appraisal requires your supervisors – or yourself to explain why this or that employee doesn't possess the necessary "Quality Focus," then no wonder no one is loving that exercise. But what if you talk instead about appraising them instead on the reasons *you actually filled the job*. Are people's work assignments done right the first time, on time? Are they resolving customer problems professionally and timely? Are they turning in their paperwork on time whether they like it or not?

Stop wasting time and money pretending to look into people's souls. Center the dialogue on what people are or are not delivering, and you can have conversations with people that can help them succeed. And helping your people succeed is the only way you succeed.