

Hugh Greenway has some suggestions for making appraisals more effective

You've spent the last 20 minutes meditating in the toilets to get into the right frame of mind. You've made an effort to look especially professional and there's a spring in your step as you walk into the office and sit down with as much positivity as you can muster.

Then your manager pulls out a ten-page checklist and says in a detached and, frankly, slightly bored voice: "So, what do you feel you've achieved this year?"

Slowly, inexorably, the life force ebbs out of you and you slump in your chair. Don't you just hate performance appraisals?! The trouble is the weight of expectation that comes with them.

Most companies fail to arrange them more often than once a year and many don't even manage this. So, for the person being appraised, the events of a whole working year are compressed into a single hour (for the geeks, that's a compression ratio of around 1,750:1). In fact it may be even worse than that; for many people being appraised, it is one year into one word: 'good' or 'bad'.

This polarity is what causes the problem. The average year at work will contain some good, some bad and lots of OK. Most managers would look at this balance, immediately focus on the bad and try to find ways to reduce its incidence.

Fortunately, some good people skills have permeated the hides of the legion of pointy-haired bosses and they know that they can't start an appraisal with "here's a list of what you did wrong this year..." They know they have to ask the employee to talk about how he feels in the job and to reflect on the successes of the year. But, mentally, they are just waiting to get round to the list of what you did wrong and it shows.

As a result, the appraisee senses that he is under attack, the defences go up and any genuine suggestions for improvement go unheard. This

is compounded by the fact that personal development plans nearly always come at the end of appraisals, by which time both parties are sick to death of the sight of each other and just want to get out of the room.

So how might we reverse this?

Let's start with the most naively ambitious approach. If we could create a culture in which employees and managers asked

for feedback¹, appraisals would be unnecessary. Imagine a working environment in which people felt secure enough to walk up to their colleagues and superiors and ask: "What's the one thing you think I need to get better at? How do you think I should go about doing that?"

A productive exchange in less time than it takes to change the toner in the photocopier and you can do this every week, not just once a year. You get a pithy piece of advice on how to improve and your manager is impressed by your genuine desire to improve.

The thing about criticism is that it hurts less if you ask for it. Inviting it on your own terms makes you more likely to do something about it rather than mope off to the pub with your friends to moan about how nobody understands you.

If this idea is too chaotic in a 'lunatics taking over the asylum' kind of way, try an older idea. My chairman recently sent me a copy of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* with a note explaining that he had just re-read it and had forgotten how good it was.

Then I watched a fascinating documentary about Warren Buffet, arguably the world's most successful investor ever, in which he explained that he had learned more from his Dale Carnegie course on public speaking than from all of the formal learning in his life.

So I went back to it (as, I would recommend, should you) and the first chapter is about criticism. Carnegie suggests that criticism is counter-productive – its recipients will simply get defensive, clam up and justify their actions. He cites as extreme examples career criminals such as Al Capone who, when censured, reject the criticism and can still create a positive self-image. He encourages an emphasis on the positive as it is more likely to be heard and acted upon.

Next time you hold an appraisal for a member of your team, invite him to tell you what he thinks he has done particularly well in the recent months. Then, provided that what he has done well is part of his job, reinforce his view with praise and ask him: "How do you think you can do more of this?"

And then help him do it.

Remember, a bigger positive has the same effect as a smaller negative on the overall sum and all of those involved are likely to enjoy the process a little more. ■



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References

1. Marshall Goldsmith, author of *What Got you Here Won't Get You There*, of whom I am a huge fan, calls this feedforward.