

“Appraisals Accelerates Teamwork”

Over recent weeks I have been involved in staff appraisal and team building reviews on both sides of the Tasman. These have ranged from businesses employing 40 to 80 operational staff through to a one on one relationship in smaller operations. I'm more convinced than ever about the importance of appraisal and how it can accelerate business performance.

Perhaps more importantly, I've been surprised at the lack of a formal approach to this in many businesses. Common misconception is that if a relationship is going well, there is no need for formal communication. Some also believe that junior or functional/operational roles don't need formal reviews.

That is simply not true. In my view appraisal is fundamental to achieving the best results on both sides of the relationship.

Managing or Drifting

With regular appraisals in place, the employment relationship maintains its focus. Each review becomes a staffing “health check”. Although things may go well initially they will deteriorate as small dissatisfactions build on each other to become eventual major breakdowns if unaddressed.

I recently dealt clients uncertain whether another appraisal should was worth the effort. There had been regular contact with their team over the past 12 months and things were going better than ever. Despite this they wisely decided that to continue the process as scheduled despite their assumption there would be nothing significant to deal with.

What emerged during the discussion surprised everyone. They weren't major issues but identifying them now and agreeing remedial strategies kept the team on focus and ensured cohesion and coordination.

Appraisals require discipline. Regular contact (3 to 6 monthly) ensures nothing is taken for granted. Anything else simply allows the relationship to drift.

Do Your homework

A key to successful appraisal is to ensure everyone has time to prepare for it and has an accurate benchmark to judge their performance by. Effective appraisals are built on job descriptions that can be converted for performance evaluation. There are examples of how we do this on our website.

Prepare by asking your staff to rank their performance against the targets in the job description. The appraisal meeting concentrates on areas where performance is not as expected. It's common for a staff member to believe they are delivering while their supervisor is not satisfied with performance. This requires restatement of standards so each strives for the same goal.

If both agree the standards are not being met then the focus must be on training and understanding systems. Sometimes staff under rate their performance and need to be encouraged and affirmed to achieve expectations.

Appraisals will not be effective if sprung on the staff member as a surprise. I discussed this with the General Manager of a large beef enterprise in Australia recently. He was embarrassed to admit that very morning he'd realised he had a spare hour in his schedule. He immediately called one of his senior staff to his office told him it was time to do an appraisal with only ten minutes given. It's no surprise the meeting was a waste of time.

Accumulate Areas for Action

The real benefit is that appraisal combined with regular staff meetings enables supervisors to deal with areas of concern in an orderly manner. When there are no appraisals, many supervisors give feedback all day, every day. This can degenerate to a constant flow of criticism that wears the team down.

A reality of leadership is learning to live with people's deficiencies on a day-to-day basis and accumulating them for action on a month-to-month basis. A formal meeting allows you to applaud achievement and then recommend areas for improvement. This keeps things in perspective and offers a more balanced approach.

Naturally there are issues that need to be dealt with on the spot but as much as possible, collect your thoughts and deal with it at a better time.

Appraisal is fundamental to getting the best from your team. Don't under-estimate how it can accelerate performance and improve delegation. It will help you to build cohesion as issues are dealt with, difficult conversations become more manageable and quality relationships result.

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