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Moving Beyond Performance Appraisals: time to make burgers of the sacred cow

Overview

There is a need to continually challenge thinking in the workplace and not accept things because some guru or consultant proposes it or because "everyone else does it" or because it's "best practice overseas or in another company". "Is this the right thing for our company/business" needs to drive where resources are spent.

"Will this improve performance? Will this increase productivity?" As the late Sir Peter Blake said about the America's Cup challenge: "will it make the boat go faster?"

Seeking solutions which improve productivity / performance is the key rather than adding to an already over-burdened compliance workplace.

Beyond Performance Appraisals proposes, not an alternative performance review, but a paradigm shift and where companies/managers are not interested in this shift in thinking, then continuing to operate with their present performance reviews (or a redesigned one) is the most logical step. But, does what exist at present (or something redesigned) provide the improved performance we seek? Did W. Edwards Deming not call Performance Appraisals "deadly sins" in the workplace?

"What's the alternative to our present Performance Appraisal?" is the wrong question to ask as this is the same thinking which created the annual performance reviews in the first place and a problem cannot be solved with the same thinking that created it.

"What happens now that we don't have a Performance Appraisal?" is where resources need to be directed. A key question becomes: "what does a workplace without annual reviews look like?" There may be slightly different expressions of what it looks like in different workplaces, but the one common identity is: "we don't do annual reviews"

"Does this work elsewhere?" is not really a legitimate question about BPA because there is enough evidence that what exists at present doesn't work and yet people continue to do it. The fact that few complain about doing the annual reviews, does not mean that they don't have an issue with them - it may mean that they can't be bothered; they go through the motions of complying. This may be a cynical view, but is it possible that staff may only be glad about the review because they got a pay increase? and that may have been the real issue. Where is the evidence that all the resources that are used in implementing annual reviews, IMPROVES performance or is that not the purpose of these reviews?

Is there research which supports this thinking? It is only fair to ask if there is research which supports that current annual staff reviews are effective, and evidence that the REASON for the effectiveness is as a DIRECT result of the reviews rather than OTHER factors? W. Edwards Deming noted that there may be "common cause variation" (a whole lot of factors contributing to improved performance) rather than "special cause variation" (it was as a direct result of implementing the annual staff reviews). The reason for the idea of Beyond Performance Appraisals is, not necessarily based in research findings, but in the idea of challenging assumptions which exist in the workplace, especially the assumption of "command and control".

There are presently many companies who operate without annual staff reviews and they may be willing to have the idea researched, but even if evidence is provided, would the BPA idea be accepted? There is a tendency among some people to refuse to accept evidence which differs from their viewpoint (and they stick to the research which supports their point of view)

This goes against much of what many HR people have learnt and many find it hard to have this paradigm shift. "How will we know how staff are performing if there are no measures or goals set?" BPA does not dismiss the fact that in some jobs there are measures which are more easily identifiable, but even these objective measures never provide the whole picture of performance and waiting until a later point in time to bring this to a person's attention is unfair and counter productive.

Annual Appraisals can't really work because the whole concept is flawed. How can anyone wait until a later point in time for performance to be addressed? Performance is a dynamic concept and must be dealt with AT THE next best appropriate TIME. Good performance/bad performance/setting expectations/development - these must all be dealt with "AS & WHEN" required. BPA provides a framework within which this new thinking fits. This is not an alternative. It is the basis of what happens in workplaces where no staff appraisals exist.

BPA FRAMEWORK:

1. Ensuring the job expectations and standards are clearly communicated. Staff may seek clarification when there is any uncertainty. [DEFINE OUTCOMES]
2. Seeking to build a culture of catching staff doing things right, rather than only addressing negative elements. Staff may also bring significant positive feedback of their colleagues to management's attention. [POSITIVE FEEDBACK]
3. Any element of substandard performance/behaviour will be addressed at the time with every endeavour made to find the REAL cause of any problem and to maintain the dignity of the individual at all times. This calls for a *ruthless with standards, but gracious with people* approach. Staff can expect this substandard performance/behaviour to be addressed and their dignity maintained. [CORRECTION]
4. Looking for development opportunities for staff to build upon their present skills and assisting in progressing their career. Staff may also request these opportunities, accepting that sometimes they may be vetoed. [CAREER PROGRESSION / DEVELOPMENT]

Some feedback from an HR manager:

"I thought you would be interested to know that Workbridge achieved a further 5 Investors in People Standards on top of retaining the 3 we achieved last year ... just 2 to go to get the complete 10. Stuart Burgess from IIP told me that the "As & When" scheme we implemented had a direct affect on several of the standards & was the one initiative that helped us achieve so many more standards this time around."

