

Employee appraisals should guide, motivate, not just criticize

HAVE SEASON TICKETS FOR THE NO. 4-ranked University of Southern California Trojans, which means that on Sunday mornings from now through early January I can tell you how many yards each of the players rushed for, how many passes they completed, interceptions they made and touchdowns they scored.

In fact, last year Trojan Carson Palmer's outstanding statistics earned him the Heisman Trophy as the country's best player in college football.

If only documenting our employees' performance were so easy. Perhaps I wouldn't grit my teeth come appraisal time if I could write, "This Thursday Jane had her sixth-best day ever as she emerged from a midyear slump to complete 10 letters in 20 minutes, a Mixtec record for any post-holiday week since 1998."

Theoretically, we all understand the importance of employee evaluations. The axiom "What gets measured gets done" applies to our workers' results just as it does to our industry's output or our products' sales.

However, if an appraisal system is out-of-date or just plain cumbersome, our inclination is to leave the forms in a filing cabinet, regardless of what personal, team or corporate benefits we might gain from their proper use.

This scenario demands that we look at our performance management system from the top down or, as former Minnesota Vikings coach Dennis Green would say, "Start from scratch and keep on scratching."

WHERE DO YOU STAND? Evaluate your current system, if any.

Most appraisal processes fall between two extremes.

The first I call the Fred Astaire foul-up. After viewing one of Fred Astaire's screen tests, a movie producer wrote, "Can't sing, can't act, can dance a little." Not only did this gentleman misjudge one of



CHRIS NELSON
Mixtec Group

Hollywood's future legends, but his critical comments provided no direction for improvement.

In business, such negativity demoralizes your workers, leaving them angry, defensive and, more importantly, with no reason to do better.

The second extreme I dub Jerry Maguire magic. Do you remember the locker room scene in which Tom Cruise pounds on the table and shouts "Help me ... help you" at Cuba Gooding Jr.? This is our ideal — using an appraisal not just to evaluate the employee's current productivity but also to motivate and guide him/her to reach greater heights tomorrow.

Be honest: Where does your system land on this spectrum? Is it nonexistent? Is it archaic and never used? Does it place blame rather than encourage progress? Does it step beyond evaluating workers to coaching and developing them?

Make appraisals collaborative.

Whatever the state of your appraisal system, making the process collaborative can only improve it. A one-sided system in which a supervisor evaluates an associate without that employee's input is ripe for conflict and resentment.

In this scenario, the employee has little or no knowledge of how the supervisor arrived at his/her final evaluation; as a result, the associate may view the appraisal process at best as mysterious and subjective, at worst as groundless and mistaken.

On the other hand, in a collaborative system both employee and su-

pervisor participate in evaluating the employee's performance. The appraisal begins with each party separately rating on a 1-to-10 scale the employee's performance on a range of pre-selected criteria or objectives (e.g. job performance, communication skills, attendance, etc.).

Then, the associate and supervisor compare their ratings and discuss any differences or specifics from their two perspectives. Finally, the parties attempt to arrive on a mutually agreed-upon rating for each item.

This open, candid format offers clear communication in three areas: 1) the position's responsibilities, expectations, and criteria for success; 2) the associate's quantitative and qualitative performance against these standards; and 3) the associate's areas of improvement and development.

Additionally, such collaboration reduces miscommunication, encourages mutual feedback and problem solving between the associate and supervisor and helps strengthen the bond between these two individuals by making them partners in the appraisal process.

PULL OUT THE PLANNER: Stick to a schedule.

Even the best collaborative system is worthless if you fail to use it. When you consider the personal, team and corporate benefits that a well-crafted performance appraisal generates, you would be foolish to accord it anything but the utmost importance.

Ideally, performance appraisals should occur once or twice a year but separately from salary reviews.

Carve out a time for supervisor and associate to sit down together with zero tolerance for interruptions. Then, make that meeting a priority for both individuals. Consistently putting off the appraisal or rescheduling it to extinguish today's fire communicates the worst message possible — that the em-

ployee and his/her results and performance are unimportant and not worth your time.

Write it down.

Although verbal evaluations and suggestions are quick and easy, especially in the hectic field of produce, take the time to document your employees' performance in writing.

In the first place, it's fair to your employees. Performance-related criteria are the only legally valid ones for salary, promotion and firing decisions. Should an employee disagree with your evaluation, or worse yet, sue you, the absence of documentation lets the conflict degenerate into a "he said, she said" finger-pointing dispute.

Consistent, objective, honest and thorough records, on the other hand, yield a better performance review and a better defense in court. While we're thinking legally, remember that documentation can be a double-edged sword. Never write anything that you would hesitate to have read to a judge or jury.

Your comments should focus solely on work-related issues and avoid speculation and hearsay. Employees' personal lives, beliefs, race, religion and so on are irrelevant to job performance and therefore have no place in your appraisal record.

According to Bob Rosner, co-author of "The Boss's Survival Guide," "poor, incomplete, dishonest and inaccurate documentation is the single most common reason that employees file and win employment-related lawsuits."

My suggestion is simple: Appraise your employees using a collaborative, documented system that links compensation to results. Then watch as your company's market appraisal soars.

In the meantime, go Trojans!

— **Chris Nelson is president of the Mixtec Group, a Pasadena-based retained executive-search and consulting firm specializing in produce. He can be reached at chrisn@mixtec.net.**