

Techniques

Responding to an unfair performance appraisal

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Abstract

Dealing with a less-than desirable performance appraisal takes skill and preparation. Provides many tips on preparing to discuss your appraisal with the boss. Runs through a possible scenario and summarizes the various stages to go through.

Appraisal can be fraught with difficulties. Jay T. Knippen and Thad B. Green suggest ways of dealing with a less than desirable performance appraisal.

You walk out of the performance appraisal in total disbelief. You can't believe what the boss said. He didn't document anything. He just talked in circles using broad innuendos and not saying anything concrete. Then he rated you a three on a five point scale. Many of the individual ratings were ridiculous. How about the "two" for attitude and the comment "attitude could be improved." You'll show him how to improve your attitude – with another company.

Performance appraisals frequently are not exactly what we expect or want. Emphasis tends to be on what you did not do or what you did wrong rather than on accomplishments. Even if more time was spent on the positive side of your performance, it would not make the appraisal palatable. Somehow, the boss has a way of making the negative dominate.

Your last appraisal is history. But your next appraisal is still in the future. Nothing can be done about what your boss said last time, but you can do something to control what he/she has to say in the next one. Dealing with a less than desirable performance appraisal takes a skill which begins with preparation.

Dealing with unfair appraisal

The first thing is to allow a few days to pass so the fury and anger can subside a little and you can approach it with a cooler head. It is hard to think clearly and logically when you are uptight with emotion. Next, review how you were evaluated. Look at the method by which you were rated. List the areas that seem to be more important to your boss. Which ones seem to be his/her favourites? Which ones are of less interest? How many concrete, documented examples of actual situations did he/she use?

Now spend some time laying out how you should be evaluated. Concentrate on areas where expected results can be stated in a specific, measurable, and realistic way. Make a list of things you hope to accomplish prior to the next appraisal period. Put it in writing. Suppose that one of the areas you want to

improve on is the number of times you come to work late. This could be stated as: "Improving on the number of times I am late for work". OK, you were able to write it down, but it could be more specific. For instance: "Reducing the number of days I am late for work". Now it is more specific, but it is not measurable. How would you know during the next performance appraisal whether or not you actually did reduce the number of times you were late or not unless you went back and counted the number of times you were late during both the last period and the current period? Therein lies the way to make this measurable. Count the number of times you were late the last period and then set a reasonable number of days to reduce it during the next period: "Reduce the number of days I am late for work to no more than two per month". Now it is measurable. Is it reasonable? Is two days per month attainable? Is it too easy to reach? Is it too difficult? To be realistic, the goal should be something you have to stretch for to attain. With some effort you can reach it. It should not be something you have to kill yourself to accomplish.

When each item on your list of "things to accomplish" is specific, measurable, and realistic, you are ready to meet your boss.

Meeting your boss

Set a time when you can both work without interruption. Establish a quiet place and time and ask your boss to arrange it so that he/she will not be interrupted as you have something important to discuss with him/her.

Open the discussion by expressing concern with your recent appraisal. Acknowledge that your boss may be concerned with your work and accept at least partial blame for both the results of your appraisal and for any concern that your boss may have for your work. Indicate a desire to improve future appraisals. Care must be taken not to attack your boss or refer to the previous appraisal as poor.

It is best to downplay the previous appraisal and concentrate on ways to make the next one better. Care must also be taken to avoid becoming defensive about your ability or previous rating, for example: "The reason I wanted to meet with you today is to discuss my recent appraisal. I know that you must have some concern with my work and I accept part of the blame for both my work and the appraisal. My goal is to improve the next

appraisal and that is specifically why I wanted to meet with you today."

Make a pitch for dealing with both your concern and your boss's

Here you will describe the benefits to both your boss and yourself: "By improving my performance during the next performance appraisal period, I will receive a better appraisal from you and you will receive better performance from me. That way we both gain."

Reach agreement on how you will be appraised

Describe to your boss the list of goals you have made for the next period. Tell him each goal is written, and is specific, measurable, and realistic. Ask for his comments on your goals: "Over the last couple of weeks I have been giving some thought to the things I think I should concentrate on to improve my performance. Here is the list I made. Each item is as specific as I could make it so both of us would know exactly on what I would be concentrating. Next, I made sure each goal had a number so it could be measured and a date by which I would accomplish it. Finally, I made sure each goal was realistic, one that would require some effort and stretching on my part, yet not so difficult that I would not be able to reach it."

Give the boss a chance to indicate how he would like to see your list of goals changed. Any differences can be negotiated. The final list should be jointly compiled: "What changes or additions do you think should be made to the list?"

Next, find out what the boss wants you to concentrate on during the next performance appraisal period: "From this list of goals for the next period, on what do you want me to especially focus?"

Finally, summarize the measurable results which you have agreed: "OK. Here is the final compilation of goals which I am going to concentrate on over the next performance appraisal period. Do you see any more additions or corrections to be made to the list?"

By putting these goals in writing, and making them specific, measurable, and realistic, you will be teaching your boss to appraise you more objectively without ever mentioning the fact that his last appraisal was subjective and undocumented. Remember,

the key is to keep the conversation future oriented.

Agree on how this approach will be implemented

Determine how each result will be measured, agreeing on the role both you and the boss will play. Also a system on when the measuring will take place and how the results will be reported must be agreed on: "All right, here is the list of goals and here is the timetable stating which of us will do the measuring and on what date."

Summarize everything

To reinforce in both your minds everything that has transpired, you should summarize the entire process. This will help assure that your next performance appraisal will be more specific and be based on objective and documented data: "To summarize what we have agreed on today, here is a list of goals which we agree will form the basis of my efforts for the next six months. During that period, both you and I will measure my progress at various times. These times are also indicated on the list. Not only will this document guide my performance, but it will also provide the structure by which you will conduct my next performance appraisal. If this sounds OK to you, I'm ready to get to work."

Give positive reinforcement to the boss for meeting you

Thank your boss for meeting you and giving you some insight as to what he/she expects you to do during the next performance appraisal period. Tell him/her how it makes you feel. Be sure to draw on your inner feelings and describe them to him/her: "Thanks a lot for meeting me. This has been a great help. It makes me feel at ease knowing exactly what I am accountable for, and by when and whom it will be measured. I now feel that I have a good grasp of what you expect of me, and I can assure you that during my next performance appraisal you will be very pleased. Thanks again."

Follow-up

Be sure to keep a tickler file that will remind you of the dates on which to measure progress on your goals. After checking it, report back to your boss to keep him informed of your progress. You are demonstrating that you are seriously working on the goals and subtly reminding him that he has an obligation to do

his/her part of the reporting: "Boss, today is the tenth of the month and that is when we agreed that I would report my progress on some of these goals. I am pleased to tell you that these two are both done, this one ahead of time. On this goal, I am about half way through which is where I should be as of this date. However, on the ninth goal I am behind. I should have had the initial cost figures completed. There are two figures I am waiting on from the suppliers. I must confess that I probably have not been pushing them hard enough and I take full responsibility for that. I will be on their backs every day this week until I get those figures."

The tickler file should also remind you of the dates on which your boss is going to be measuring your progress and be giving you some feedback. If he/she is a few days late in doing this, remind him of his/her obligation to do this: "I noticed that it is the twentieth of the month and I was wondering if you had forgotten to give me a report on my progress towards the goals, or if perhaps some other pressing matters have kept you from it".

Give positive reinforcement when the boss follows up

When the boss does follow up by giving you feedback as he/she said he would, be sure to give him positive reinforcement: "Thanks for the feedback on my progress. It really helps me when you show me that what I am doing is important enough to give me input. It makes me feel like my job is worthwhile."

Summary

Improving your performance appraisal need not be left to chance. You can take an active role to assure that the next appraisal is handled by your boss in a more effective manner. This can be effectively handled by:

- preparing to deal with the unfair appraisal;
- meeting your boss;
- making a pitch for dealing with both your concern and your boss's;
- reaching agreement on how you will be appraised;
- agreeing on how this approach will be implemented;
- summarizing everything;
- giving positive reinforcement to the boss for meeting you;
- following up;
- giving positive reinforcement when the boss follows up.