

GIVE CREDIT WHEN IT'S DUE

Frequent communication — not the yearly appraisal — is the answer to managing staff performance

MANY years ago, my first task as a newly appointed graduate trainee in what was then called "personnel" — today's human resources — was to help transfer the organisation's performance and appraisal systems over to a medium-sized company that we had recently acquired.

Every complaint about performance management, every difficulty I experienced nearly 40 years ago, are the problems and difficulties I find today in all the organisations I work with. Nothing has changed in my working life!

About 1,700 years ago, the Chinese philosopher Sin Yu remarked: "The Imperial Rater of Nine Grades seldom rates men according to their merits, but always according to his likes and dislikes."

In other words, little has changed in nearly 2,000 years — people still complain about bias, prejudice and the general unfairness of the performance management system.

The truth is, of course, that there is usually little wrong with the system; the problem is the eternal one of people managing and judging other people.

At the heart of the dilemma is this simple yet brutal truth. In every organisation, the vast majority of people honestly believe their performance to be in the top quartile!

This means that at least 80 per cent of all members of staff believe their performance to be better, or at least as good, as all of their peers. Convincing them otherwise is an uphill task.

The following tips on managing performance represent some of the key principles and good advice collected over the years:

- Constant communication with staff members over the year is the cornerstone of good performance management. Give frequent feedback about performance and praise good work. Ensure goals are clearly communicated and that your expectations



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are fully understood by members of your staff.

- Remember, performance appraisal is once a year — performance management is every day, every week and every month.

- When giving feedback, be positive and constructive, not negative and critical. Be descriptive rather than evaluative, specific rather than general.

- The performance review must be a two-way process. Listen actively and reflect on what is being said, and encourage staff to do most of the talking if possible.

- Adopt a policy of "No Surprises" — performance problems should have been

identified and dealt with at the time they occurred. Appraisees should be aware of and anticipate the points you wish to raise.

- Build good relationships. Be honest, consistent and never promise what you cannot deliver or threaten what you cannot carry out. Trust is earned and without trust the review will not be as productive as it might be.

- There will be people whom you like and others whom you do not like. Analyse performance, not personality. Keep the two separate.

- You must be well prepared for the appraisal. You need to collect a factual historical record, particularly when dealing with difficult reviews.

- Keep the whole period under review — do not concentrate on isolated or recent events.

- Be aware of the common rating errors that are well documented as causing "bias" in the mind of the appraiser.

- About 80 per cent of reviews are reasonably straightforward — deal with these first, get into the "swing" and then deal with the others.

- When appraising someone, start with his strengths, praise and encourage where deserved and then move gradually to the more difficult areas.

- Follow up on action points agreed at the appraisal — one of the most frequent complaints of appraisees is that there is no follow up.

Of all the tips mentioned above, giving feedback is one of the most difficult tasks the appraiser must face — particularly in an Asian culture.

Giving feedback can be difficult, but it is a skill that may be developed with proper training and constant practice.

Unfortunately, feedback has become associated with negative criticism when, in fact, it should be a way to let people know how effective they are in what they are trying to accomplish and how they may become even more effective.

Ken Blanchard summed up the relevance of feedback nicely when he wrote all those years ago in *The One-Minute Manager*: "Feedback is the breakfast of champions."

Go feed your champions!. — Source: ST/ANN

■ Article by Chris Fenney, director of Training Edge International, which provides integrated training solutions to organisations to develop their people.