
Why Performance Management Will Remain Broken: Authoritarian Communication

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We agree with Pulakos and O’Leary (2011) that the focus of efforts in performance appraisal should be on the relationship between managers and their employees. We also agree with their focus on relational processes rather than structures (e.g., merit grids) or outcomes (e.g., goals) as ways to intervene in and evaluate effectiveness of performance management systems. However, separating appraisal systems from this focal relationship is perhaps more of an analytic lever, based on reductionist attempts to analyze and understand the complex phenomena around performance feedback, than it is a solid basis for practical action.

We suggest here that performance management systems are cultural artifacts that carry messages to organization members about the appropriate relationships between parties. Indeed, Pulakos and O’Leary hint at this when they state, “Done effectively, performance management communicates what’s important to the organization, drives employees to achieve results, and implements the organization’s strategy. Done poorly, performance management not only fails to achieve these benefits but can also

undermine employee confidence and damage relationships.” We take this further, however, and argue that training about feedback and focusing on relationships, although they may create a more efficient media for “communicating clearer work expectations,” are still not enough for optimal communication and also fall prey to an authoritarian mandate.

Based on previous research and practice related to voice (Cawley, Keeping, & Levy, 1998) and self-appraisal-based performance appraisal (Steel & Ovalle, 1984), we suggest that two-way, non authoritarian performance management systems and relationships are likely to provide the greatest clarity among all parties about work expectations and the feedback that follows from observation of work behaviors. We will briefly review and suggest “relationship messengers” imbedded in systems that may clearly communicate a less authoritarian culture, facilitating greater communication about work expectations.

Separation of the System From the Relationship

Pulakos and O’Leary set out the responsibilities of managers implicit in traditional performance appraisal systems. Unfortunately, there is an important assumption in this description that is not addressed in their article and that seems to have been recognized

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in some previous work. Although it is true that the central relationship that makes most systems ineffective is the assumed “supervisor–subordinate relationship,” a fundamental assumption about the nature of this relationship needs to be addressed. This relationship is generally framed as managers being responsible for *defining criteria and standards*, then observing and providing the formal and informal job feedback at the core of performance management, with employees taking this feedback and following it. Although 360-degree systems vest the observation and evaluation functions in other parties, the *standards* for performance are still predetermined. The point is that these approaches posit a sort of “empty vessel” wherein employees follow orders, with little or no judgment or input about standards or criteria, while managers perform the role of absolute authority in these matters. It also belies the obvious reality that performance appraisal discussions actually are discussions—substantive *conversations* between two adults in the workplace.

Perhaps even more troublesome is the notion that human resource and industrial–organizational (I–O) professionals are responsible for “training” managers and impressing upon them the importance of performance management. Again, this belies a “father knows best” approach that is, in our view, bound to fail in many organizations. In particular, flat organizations with very fluid work roles and relationships, peopled by professionals with their own codes of ethical conduct and standards, will complicate authoritarian approaches. Recent views presented in this very journal (e.g., Highhouse, 2008 and subsequent commentaries) have dealt with the problems associated with professional I–O psychologists attempting to treat their expertise as ascendant.

How the System Informs Relationship Expectations

Nevertheless, major initiatives in the performance appraisal literature suggest that authors (including Pulakos & O’Leary), at

some level, understand that the effectiveness of an appraisal system relies on broadening of the relationships that define criteria and standards. These are self-appraisal-based performance evaluations at General Electric (GE) (Farh, Werbel, & Bedeian, 1988; Meyer, 1980), management by objectives and its offspring (e.g., Pritchard, Jones, Roth, Stuebing, & Ekeberg, 1989; also mentioned as “cascading goals” in Pulakos & O’Leary), and multisource ratings (Klimoski & London, 1974). In each case, the traditional, top-down relationship central to common performance review is significantly altered. In self-appraisal-based performance appraisals, the subordinate prepares the document from which appraisal discussions devolve. In management by objectives, a negotiation between subordinate and supervisor is prescribed as the basis for future standards for feedback and discussion. Multisource feedback is perhaps the most extensive and in some ways most effective (Atwater, Brett, & Charles, 2007) approach to expanding the relational basis for feedback, except that “work expectations” remain.

An even more prominent attempt to alter this relationship assumption is the research on employee voice. Here, employees are given a chance to alter both the nature and outcomes of feedback. This comes closer to a real, adult conversation between equal partners. Still, a strong voice in the definition of performance expectations, rather than treating these as “constants,” is largely missed in this literature. In fact, the idea of “fixed” job expectations is itself increasingly untenable, given rapid changes in work functions and processes.

In our view, the core issue here is who defines work expectations. A constant assumption even in management by objectives is that of the authoritarian relationship between manager and employee. Pulakos and O’Leary assume this in their use of language but, like other progressive researchers, do not take the additional step of thinking of many manager–employee relationships as negotiated, ongoing job definition processes. Specifically, attention

to the causes of work behavior mentioned in their article (subordinate motivation, ability, and awareness of expectations) ignores the possibility that employees themselves may have better ideas about how to perform their jobs than do their managers. We suspect that many successful managers habitually treat considerable portions of professional and management work as subjects of continuous, job-defining conversations. This sort of continuous, mutual job analysis (Youngcourt, Leiva, & Jones, 2007) has the benefit of helping managers understand the work of their professional staff in order to better advocate for resources, clarify for others what their units are up to, and develop approaches to cope with emergent circumstances. Our data (Youngcourt et al., 2007) also suggest that employees are considerably more satisfied when they perceive their performance approached this way.

Concluding Thoughts

Although we agree with the basic premise of Pulakos and O'Leary's stance, with a focus on the relationship between employee and manager in lieu of a focus on formal administrative systems with an overemphasis on prescribed steps, we believe there needs to be a removal, to some extent, of the authoritarian nature of the relationship before there can be any real progress. The communication between the two parties must be one of mutual respect and consideration, with a focus on defining and redefining standards and expectations. Until this occurs, the "communication" that occurs in many appraisal situations between managers and employees will

continue to result in "broken" performance management systems and calls for the abolishment of such systems.

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