

Quality Performance Appraisal for Library Staff

Introduction

In the digital world nowadays when information is readily available on the Internet, it is the people who make a library different from the search engines. Libraries need staff that can cope with the changing learning needs of users. Quality staff performance appraisals, if they are used in a developmental sense, can be powerful tools to this end. That is, if they are used as an assessment *for* learning, not an assessment *of* learning.

This paper attempts to first define staff performance appraisals, then to discuss their purposes and values. Some common problems of appraisal, such as rating errors, will be presented. Examples of how some academic libraries address the quality issue of staff appraisals will also be illustrated. Finally, recommendations will be provided on how these current practices can be improved.

What is Staff Appraisal?

In the *Dictionary of Human Resource Management* (2001), appraisal is defined as “the process of evaluating the performance and assessing the development/training needs of an employee.” This definition entails two aspects. The first is judgmental; that is, the staff’s performance is measured against certain standards. The second is developmental; that is, no positive or negative judgment will be involved, but to identify the training needs of the staff and to find out what can be done to improve related skills and knowledge.

Partington and Stainton (2003) present three important purposes of performance appraisal. First, it furnishes recognition for the meritorious aspects of the staff member’s performance. Second, it alerts the staff member to the degrees of improvement needed in any weaker aspect of his/her performance. And third, it prioritizes the aspects of performance in which improvement is needed.

Many benefits can be derived from development-oriented staff appraisal. Partington and Stainton (2003) suggest that, “Staff appraisal provides the means by which enhanced communication between staff and senior colleagues can determine systematic identification of roles, tasks, targets and training plans for individuals, which support departmental and institutional goals.”

Staff appraisal reports can be used as reinforcement for staff learning and development. An effective appraisal encourages two-way communication and improves mutual understanding. Seeing from the organizational point of view, since goal setting and future plans are involved, appraisal can be a tool to identify individual staff needs and how they can be linked to the organizational management and future planning for training and development. Specific actions and plans can then be suggested as to how individuals could improve. Seeing from the individual's point of view of hearing encouragement instead of judgment, the motivation to improve can be enhanced and job satisfaction can be increased. Appraisal can also be an opportunity to reflect on their accomplishments and achievements.

Issues of Staff Appraisal in Academic Libraries

Common Problems

Many academic libraries carry out staff performance appraisal annually. Yet in some libraries, it is not uncommon that staff members do not take staff appraisal seriously enough. Appraisal sometimes ends up being just another annual task to be finished by the deadline. It is done because it is necessary, and once done, it will be out of sight, out of mind. Let us now take a look at the examples of some common problems.

Most academic libraries adopt the centralized appraisal form issued by their universities. As Prentice (2005) describes, "The centrally devised rating form provides a general assessment but does not address differences in activities or applications from unit to unit." The job nature of library staff members is, in fact, different from other academic and administrative units of the university. Even internally, the nature of work is very different between reader services and technical services. Clearly, the one-for-all type appraisal form designed to serve a general purpose will not be able to adequately reflect the specificity of skills and knowledge performed by the library staff.

Rating scales are commonly found in the appraisal form used in academic libraries. Some are used in appraising supporting staff only, while some are used for all categories of staff. However, the quantitative "categoric" forms, such as grades, marks, ranks, percentages and levels, is always a criticism of appraisals. As Broadfoot (1998) points out, "It constitutes a powerful inhibitory force to the development of the understandings and practices that are increasingly being called for in the post-modern 'learning age' and it has 'profoundly influenced learners' confidence and self-esteem.'" Although Broadfoot's advocacy is in the education sector, the call for a change in concepts of "to learn, not to measure" is also applicable in the library context. Being ranked or to rank a colleague are both embarrassing.

The author has the experience of receiving staff members transferred to her from other departments. These staff were said to be under-performing and were unwelcome by their supervisors, yet surprisingly their appraisal reports were much better than what was said about them. This indicates that not all appraisers give true accounts in the written appraisal report. In order to avoid argument, appraisers sometimes do not truthfully reflect the weaknesses of an appraisee. Some appraisers believe that they have no right to stand in judgment and may just give a higher ranking to the appraisee to keep everybody happy. Some appraisers may want to keep a good relationship with the appraisee so as to get his/her cooperation in future collaborative activities, as they may fear that senior management will consider the lack of cooperation as the appraiser's inability to deal with problem staff.

A number of common rating errors have been frequently cited. These include *leniency*, which refers to the tendency to give appraisees higher ranks than they deserve. *Severity* is opposite to leniency; it is to give appraisees lower ratings than what they should get. *Central tendency* is to choose the middle point in any range of scale to play safe, but cannot illustrate effectively the staff's actual performance. *Halo effect* is the tendency to judge the appraisee's performance by only one particular aspect. *Similarity or contrast error* is the tendency to give people who are more similar to the appraiser a higher ranking or vice versa. *Stereotyping* is to pre-judge a person's performance on the basis of general beliefs about characteristics such as gender, age and race.

Another problem of appraisal is that every appraiser has their own standards of judgment. It is thus difficult to obtain a fair evaluation across. Appraiser A, who is being rated as "Good" by Appraiser X may in fact out perform Appraiser B, who is being rated as "Excellent" by Appraiser Y.

Planning and Implementation

Not every library requires appraisers to work out the performance objectives with appraisees in a separate exercise in advance. This is, in fact, not fair to the supervisees as they do not know how they are going to be assessed in the following year. Besides, with no set targets to evaluate against, the appraisal will normally be based on some single incidents or just the general impression of the staff. The Library of the City University of Hong Kong requires supervisors to discuss with staff and set performance objectives or targets in the beginning of the year as a standard for the next appraisal to base on. Although extra work will be required from the appraisers, such practice should be encouraged as it will involve a higher level of staff participation and interaction in the process and enhance the effectiveness of the appraisal.

Partington and Stainton (2003) have shared another issue. It is said that “Staff currently still see little or no link between the appraisal process and the formulation and achievement of departmental and institutional plans, the identification of and provision for continuing professional development.” Most libraries link the staff appraisal to staff training and development. However, the link is often too loose. Appraisers may be required to put down in the appraisal form their recommendation of staff training and development. Nevertheless, there is often no detailed account of how the recommendation will be followed up and by whom it will be taken care of. There is usually no mechanism to guide appraisers to follow up the appraisal. Besides, appraisees themselves may not agree with the training needs. Some may not be interested in the training and development suggested; others may not be able to afford time to attend training programmes. In reality, even though the appraisees also recognize that their performance is unsatisfactory and want to improve, there may not be suitable learning opportunities available.

Effectiveness

Appraisal can be powerful and influential if it is used for reinforcement and disciplinary decisions, such as staff promotion, crossing of efficiency bar and pay raises, as well as termination of contract. Yet in reality, appraisal is rarely the major determinant. For example, no matter how the appraisal of a contract term staff may be, the contract may not be renewed if the budget does not allow. And for libraries that are still adopting the system of annual incremental salary increase, a regular term staff member may still get the additional salary point as long as he/she has not reached the maximum point of the salary scale.

Not all libraries have measures to follow up what has been written in the appraisal report or there is no consequence of unsatisfactory performance. Some appraisees do not care very much what the appraiser says, as they know the report will not be followed up by any substantial action and it makes no differences to their position. As quoted in the *Dictionary of Human Resource Management* (2001), “There are management cynics in every workplace who view appraisal as an unnecessary bureaucratic exercise which takes them away from their ‘real’ work. Similarly, there are cynical employees who view appraisal as an unnecessary hoop they have to jump through every year because it makes no difference to how they undertake their work or the opportunities they are given.”

In view of the staff time spent, staff appraisal has always, been a very labor-intensive task in academic libraries. Yet investment in the training of appraisers is surprisingly inadequate. As Jordan (2002) has pointed out, “Implementing a new or revised appraisal system is almost certainly doomed to failure if the correct emphasis is not placed upon training appraisers” (Jordan, Lloyd, & Jones, 2002).

Recommendations

To foster an effective staff appraisal system, a few measures should be considered.

Training of Appraiser

The first key to a successful appraisal system is the appraiser. The appraisers must be able to see the values of the appraisal exercise and good training for appraisers is, therefore, essential. Carrying out staff appraisal and evaluation each year should not be treated as just a regular routine, and it is certainly not a formality.

As Byars (2004) remarks, “A more promising approach to overcoming errors in performance appraisals is to improve the skills of raters.” Pynes (2004) also claims that “Training can improve raters’ documentation and counseling skills, thereby not only reducing their discomfort but also enabling them to help employees understand and acknowledge their own strengths and areas that need improvement.” Although most personnel offices of universities issue guidelines for staff appraisals, they are usually too general and do not cater to the specific needs of libraries. Thus, libraries should design an in-house guideline and provide adequate and specific training to appraisers.

Appraisers should be trained to be open-minded, honest, positive and skillful in addressing staff members’ capabilities and competences. Clear guidelines and effective training system should be developed for appraisers to reasonably report the strengths and weaknesses of the appraisee and make logical and fair recommendation as to how the appraisee can be assisted in an improvement plan. Most of all, the appraisers should be guided to appraise the work performed, not the person.

The Appraisal Form

Libraries would benefit more if the tool for the appraisal – the appraisal form – is tailor-made to suit its own situation and specific needs. In view of the specific job nature of library staff, libraries should design their own appraisal form or modify the central form to tailor for each group of staff to accurately and effectively reflect the important aspects of the performance evaluation. As mentioned earlier, the nature of work is quite different between reader services and technical services, so if libraries could customize the performance evaluation standards for different categories of staff, so much the better.

It is believed that open-ended questions probing for detailed accounts are more useful than a rating scale. A rating scale often gives appraisers the excuse to just check the boxes without giving their comments. Open-ended questions avoid the embarrassment caused by rating

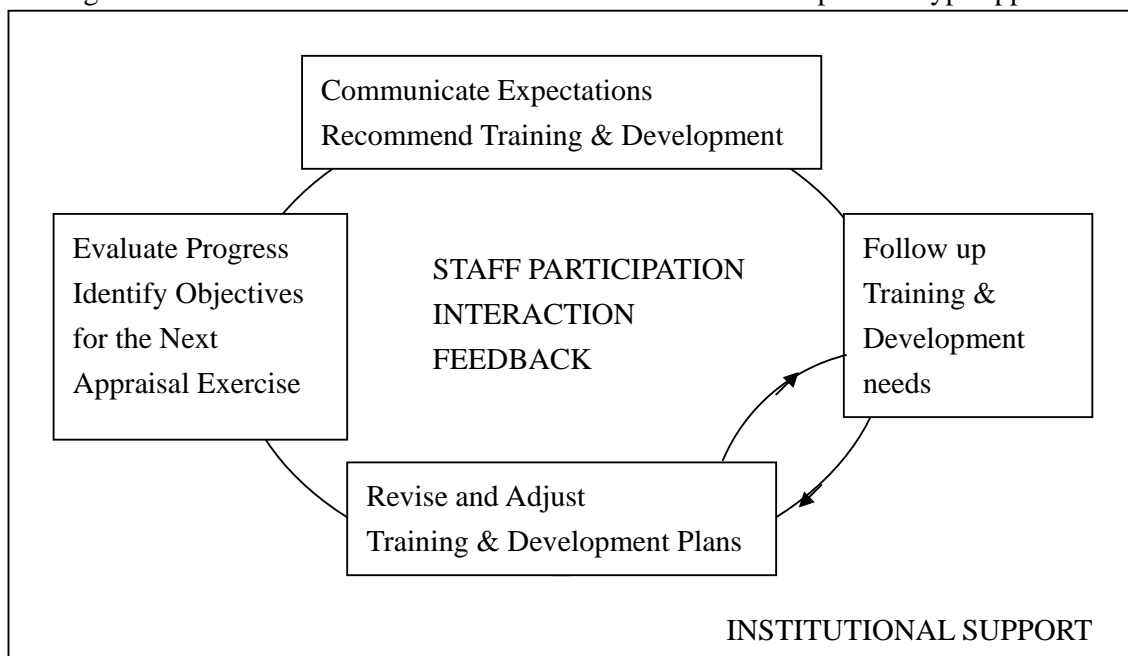
and invite staff to present their viewpoints in their own words. It is also important that negative words such as “barriers” and “obstacles” should not be used in the questions; especially barriers and obstacles, in many cases, are largely related to the limited resources or heavy workload instead of the appraisee’s ability and motivation.

Setting objectives

Another key to a successful staff appraisal system is the communication of expectations. The appraisal is a tool for the senior management to envision the staff to share the institutional mission of the university, as well as the specific goal and purpose of the library. Objectives should, therefore, be clearly identified and communicated. Appraisers should first explicitly let staff know what the expectations are and then provide a development plan for how to meet these expectations as well as necessary support.

For the appraisal to be effective, apart from institutional support, staff participation and interaction are essential in setting the objectives and measurable targets, as well as drafting the standards and guidelines for evaluation. A serious but positive and in-depth appraisal interview with semi-structured questions should be carried out before the report is drafted. As Cole (2002) has suggested, “Where openness and participation are encouraged, any system will be discussed first with those involved, with the result that appraisals are more likely to be joint problem-solving affairs rather than a ‘calling to account’ by a superior.” Interim discussion sessions with continuous follow up and revision of the staff’s training and development needs should be arranged and should focus on communication, sharing, feedback and coaching. This arrangement also allows appraisees more time to improve/develop towards the objectives set.

This diagram shows the activities that should be involved in a developmental type appraisal:



Staff development

As Jordan (2002) criticizes, “Appraisal may be seen as ‘form-dominated’ and staff see the exercise as one of form-filling.” This is because appraisal is often done as a one-off exercise. In fact, effective appraisal should be continuous and developmental.

As it has been emphasized, appraisal should be an assessment *for* learning. Focus should be put more on motivation, satisfaction, development and improvement than individual performance. Just evaluating individual strengths and weaknesses or the output of particular tasks does not help the library much. What the library needs is to aim at a cultural change through the staff development system and explore ways and give suggestions of follow-up actions to help staff improve their knowledge and working attitude and as a result, facilitate good performance. A strategic staff development plan should be the target of each appraisal. Yet any plan is bound to fail if it is not followed through. Therefore, the development plan should state specifically what actions will be taken if the proposed plan does not work out.

Many academic libraries rely on the central training programmes organized by the Human Resources Department of their universities. These courses are usually catered for non-specific audiences. Of course, general topics such as customer services, supervisory skills and management are beneficial to all staff of any unit. Yet library staff members particularly need more specific training that is related to library services and development, collection and resources, user behaviour and needs, knowledge management, management of change and professionalism. Libraries are thus advised to carry out systematic staff needs assessment, directly response to the learning needs of staff members and organize specific tailor made development programmes.

Another way to reflect more accurately staff members’ performance and potential would be to implement a job rotation scheme for staff. In some academic libraries, staff may have worked under the same supervisor for a long time. As their performances are always assessed by the same appraiser, problems of inaccuracy and biased assessment such as rating errors, if any, are likely to retain. With an organized and systematic job rotation arrangement, staff members will have the chance to work in different positions and apply different knowledge and skills. There will be an accumulation of comments written by different appraisers. To be appraised by more than one appraiser may achieve a more truthful appraisal and biased judgment can then be avoided.

For libraries where no scheduled job rotation is arranged, managers may make use of the chances when staff members from various departments work together in projects and tasks beyond their everyday responsibilities. It is, indeed, an excellent opportunity for project

leaders to appraise any staff member involved. One advantage is that the staff member will receive comments from an appraiser who is not his/her own line manager. Furthermore, many projects involved tasks such as project management, liaison and coordination, publicity, reception, editing, publishing and public speaking, are totally different from the daily routine tasks staff members are handling. Performance appraisal in this regard could reveal a staff's potential in areas other than their regular library duties. Thus, management may be able to explore potentials of staff members that are unaware of previously.

Conclusion

An effective appraisal system is essential for human resources management in an organization. It encourages staff development and helps increase productivity. Quality staff performance appraisal, if administered appropriately in a developmental sense, can become a channel to provide more learning opportunities to staff, which is a powerful instrument in building a learning organization.

A quality and effective appraisal system helps the library develop a more open and liberal culture. It would promote open discussions among all levels, leading to cooperation, and will encourage constructive comments without hard feelings. Libraries should, therefore, shift from an evaluative approach to the human relations and developmental approach when carrying out appraisal. The concentration is to train the appraisers, strengthen the staff communication and interaction, focus on training and development, re-design the tool, improve the accuracy of the assessment, and ensure appropriate follow-up actions. It is only with such a paradigm shift that organisations may be able to facilitate a learning society for staff and successfully develop the right staff to cope with the changing environment.

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