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Fresh Pathways to Performance Management

by Colleen Foran and Colleen Doylend

For anyone in a leadership position, responsible for the performance of others, there is always an obvious concern with the quality of the work performed and the adherence to the mission, vision, values and culture of the organization. Traditional methods of assuring quality performance include some form of performance appraisal, giving feedback on staff members' performance as the key element of the process. Much attention has focussed on the manner in which feedback is given. This paper will propose that the most effective way to monitor and encourage high performance is not to 'give' but instead to 'elicit' feedback. By employing a coaching process, Cognitive Coachingsm for example, a leader is able to encourage and inspire staff to focus their skills and intellect on performing their duties with increasing levels of commitment and creativity.

Current notions of performance feedback include a sequence of interactions between the supervisor and employee that begins with a Human Resource generated notice of annual review date. This motivates the supervisor to pull the file and note significant events, meet with the employee to discuss successes and challenges of the past year, set goals for next year and complete the standardized form. The form and file are often then put away until the next notice for annual review comes up, or a serious performance issue arises. The performance appraisal process is intended to trigger pay increments, promotions or transfers; establish work goals; determine professional development; direct a record of employee performance issues for probation and termination; and to monitor work standards. The supervisor-directed discussion identifies outcomes; standards of performance and critical success factors; development opportunities; potential for learning; and evaluation of progress.

While the aim of traditional performance appraisal is "to be an on-going open process of mutual exploration and learning" (Hudson et al; 2002), the challenges include convincing supervisors to take the time to engage in the process, ensuring objectivity, setting appropriate and fair standards, and ensuring consistency in ratings among supervisors. While this list recognizes the obvious challenges in the supervisor's performance management process, a less obvious, but more insidious issue is that of supervisors being too charitable in their evaluations. When supervisors avoid "difficult" conversations or problem behaviours, issues simmer underground and may surface often at inopportune moments with more extreme consequences. What might start as a barely significant incident or inattention to issues raised by staff may lead to a ripple through a department with ever increasing detrimental effects. The end result of this lack of

attention can be a working environment in which a staff member doesn't trust his or her supervisor or other employees. Supervisors who overlook the underlying concept of performance management and use it only as performance appraisal or evaluation, risk setting up confrontational environments in the workplace, damaging relationships with employees, and losing focus on workplace culture and mission, vision and values of the organization.

This approach of performance appraisal also promotes the assumption that the supervisor motivates and directs the employee so that the employee will subsequently be motivated to perform productively by way of recognition, achievement, responsibility, and inspiration through the work itself. Even with training for both employees and supervisors regarding their roles in the performance appraisal process, there are limitations of the static framework of reviewing, assessing and recording another person's performance. Let us now consider the impact of this process on the receiver. Several researchers have identified different effects that arise from giving feedback as part of the performance management process and how these effects are related to the leadership activities and intentions of the supervisors.

Alfie Kohn, in his challenging book "Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes", (1993) incites us to consider the ways in which we have learned to inspire others. Kouzes and Posner define leadership as "the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations" (1995, p. 30). Yet, research by the Hay Group indicates that "three-quarters of unhappy employees do not believe their organization knows where it is going; nearly half of satisfied employees feel the same" (2001, p. 11). How to achieve this mobilization is the issue, and of fundamental importance is the trust that leaders inspire in their staff. Kramer (1999) notes that trust is based on the personal qualities of the leader as well as the environment in which one works. Trust is built over time, and is often a result of the position within an organization, and through the perception of others (Kramer, 1999). It is the environment of trust that will inspire staff to reach for, and possibly extend beyond, what they might have initially believed to be their potential.

The research conducted by Kohn challenges us to rethink the traditional notions of feedback and reward systems. What we want to do is to create an atmosphere in which staff members are eager to come to work. Recognizing that we cannot motivate another, we can create an environment where staff members feel accepted for whom they are. As Peter Scholtes observes, "People don't resist change, they resist being changed" (cited in Kohn, 1993, p. 193). Kohn's research indicates that rewarding people for their behaviour does little to increase productivity or motivation, and may even harm the way individuals feel about their work and themselves. This is irrespective of whether the rewards are tangible, bonuses for example, or verbal, such as positive feedback. In the same vein, Carol Sanford has found

that telling people about their behaviour does little, or nothing, to change it. In work with Chlorox, Sanford (1997) studied interactive feedback, where feedback on how to become a better worker was provided to one person by his or her peers, superiors and/or subordinates. Sanford identified several 'myths' about the effectiveness of feedback: Feedback one person gives another often is related more to the person giving the feedback than the recipient. Evaluators tend to project their own needs and issues onto others, rather than accurately perceiving the other person. Feedback can also tend to standardize behaviour; this is clearly evident from the use of standardized appraisal forms. Standardizing behaviour can have the unintended effect of stifling creativity. Contrary to traditional thought, feedback does not allow people to see themselves more clearly. Instead of increasing capacity to see and understand the self, externally provided feedback actually decreases the capacity of self-awareness. People's dependence on others to tell them how they are doing ultimately eats away at confidence in their own ability to assess their own behaviour. To gain further insight into this phenomenon, Sanford (1997) studied the abilities of children to accurately report on themselves. At the beginning of the study, the 9-and 10-year-olds were adamant about the accuracy of their perceptions, even in the face of irrefutable evidence such as video or audio recording. Children who were then allowed to self-report on their behaviour increased the accuracy of their perceptions, while children who continued to be provided with video feedback came to depend on the feedback rather than their own assessment. This study points out an interesting implication for the work environment, adults who have been fed a steady diet of external feedback will likely not have the self-awareness skills to accurately rate their own behaviour. This is especially important for leaders who not only need to be able to assess their own behaviour, but to be cognizant of not imposing their perceptions on their staff members.

Coaching is becoming recognized as a viable method of monitoring and assessing performance. Loral Langemeier (1997) identifies nine benefits of professional coaching: improving performance and productivity; promoting personal growth and leadership abilities; increasing real-time learning; enhancing relationships; improving the work environment; increasing time for attending to business rather than problems; increasing creativity; promoting greater flexibility and adaptability to change; and shortening responses to emergencies. Coaching skills, while not necessarily currently part of leaders' toolkits, are learnable, and are critical for effective development of self-assessment in staff members. They are also central in the establishment of an environment of trust in which staff members feel safe to engage in honest self-assessment. People need psychological security to optimize their learning and performance (Garmston, 1999). Of the six leadership styles, Goleman (2000) identified, he proposes the most effective leaders master several styles including authoritative, democratic, affiliative, and coaching styles. The challenge Goleman identifies for the coaching style of leadership is that "…it flops if the leader lacks the expertise to

help the employee along." however, he also points out that "although the coaching style may not scream "bottom-line results," it delivers them" (2000, p. 87). The question then arises, how does a leader maintain performance enhancement, meet the bottom-line, and create a respectful, responsible coaching environment? Debling (2003) points us in the right direction to start this journey: leaders can use feedback that is "…descriptive, rather than evaluative and [which] describes behaviours observed, not inferences about their causes [and] is specific rather than general." (p. 20).

We will now add to these points that leaders suspend the impulse to give feedback and rather ask open-ended, questions to elicit assessment from staff members. The framing of the questions is critical to the success of this process. Often we inadvertently imbed presuppositions into our questions or formulate rhetorical questions. The questions employed must encourage staff members to risk, to engage themselves in a reflective process that clarifies their thinking. Without a trusting relationship, this process cannot occur. Goleman's (2000) identification of the leadership skills needed to effectively coach staff members presents part of the process. The other key part is that leaders can effectively create a trusting environment that Kramer (1999) and Kouzes and Posner (1995) talk about. This environment can be created by the leaders:

- being authentic as individuals first and bosses second,
- creating a history of trustworthiness of consistency in behaviour and expectations so that staff members know what to expect, and
- respecting staff members through recognition of their abilities to come up with solutions.

Developing the skills of Cognitive Coaching[sm] can assist leaders in fostering the self-assessment capacity of their staff. While many of these skills are employed in counselling-type interactions, Cognitive Coaching[sm] adds the focus of approaching the interaction with the intention of enhancing the thinking of the other person, without giving advice or directing the other person towards some predetermined end. In the full coaching cycle employed in Cognitive Coaching[sm], the coach (leader) mediates the thinking of the staff member by having him or her clarify goals, determine success indicators, anticipate approaches and strategies and how to monitor them, and identify the personal learning focus. The leader then observes the staff member during work, noting the specific success indicators identified by the staff member in the earlier coaching session. Subsequently, the staff member is guided through a reflecting conversation to summarize impressions, recall supporting information, and analyze, infer, and determine cause and effect relationships. Lastly, the coach encourages the staff member to construct new learning and applications, and to reflect on the coaching process. Thus the leader provides coaching through four phases of performance (planning, monitoring, analyzing, and applying) as identified by the developers of Cognitive Coaching[sm]. These 'conversations' can be skilfully employed

with the focus of assisting the staff member to gain clarity, diversity or creativity in his or her thinking.

Maintaining or increasing productivity in the workplace is an obvious concern for any business or institution. Assessment is intended to reflect organizational short and long-term objectives as well as the employee's work plan. The work plan then establishes the foundation for the employee's professional development requirements. The supervisor coaches the employee to answer the question, "What do you want to be different as a result of this professional development?" Determining development opportunities is a mutual discussion, with the supervisor supporting the employee to succeed. The challenge is that getting to this step with the traditional assessment process is extremely difficult. Yet, replacing the process of 'giving feedback' with a process that elicits self-assessment naturally leads to this outcome and has substantial basis in research.

N.B. Cognitive Coaching[sm] is a service marked process. For more information, contact the Centre for Cognitive Coaching at www.cognitivecoaching.com

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◀ **Contents**