

## Performance Appraisals... and Why They're Such Bad News

Performance appraisals should be consigned to the corporate dustbin alongside fax machines, manual typewriters and mobile phones the size of housebricks.

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That is the opinion of InterBe which delivers transformational learning and development for large organisations and SMEs. Director Mo Cohen explains why he believes that performance appraisals are bad news and what he recommends instead.

Performance appraisals have become an integral part of business culture. In theory they are about evaluating and documenting an employee's performance, giving them feedback about how they are doing and offering them opportunities for personal development and growth, as well as the chance to feed back to the company how things are for them. The reality of performance appraisals tends to be very different, however.

### Made wrong

Often, they are less about empowering employees and more about pointing out what is going wrong. Rarely do employees feel encouraged or motivated by the experience, which can easily descend into criticism, blame and justification. Employees feel "made wrong" by a process that seeks to measure their performance without giving any real consideration to context or circumstances. While organisations may believe that performance appraisals provide evidence upon which to base their organisational development plans, this evidence is rarely accurate or "true".

### Old-fashioned hierarchy

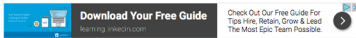
Research shows that one of the most important factors in determining an employee's level of motivation and performance at work is the relationship they have with their direct line manager. This relationship is more important even than an employee's ability to identify with organisational culture and values although, clearly, there is a direct link between the way that managers think and act at the top of an organisation and how this cascades down to the employees.

There is an increasing focus in business on empowering their employees and giving them greater autonomy in the workplace. This is regarded as one of the most important factors in achieving lasting cultural change.

Performance appraisals are a symbol of the old-fashioned hierarchical approach that so many businesses are now trying to get away from. They are the epitome of top-down thinking, reinforcing the traditional status of manager and subordinate. Typically, an appraisal looks for what is wrong and focuses on what is not working, albeit under the guise of trying to fix it. A big missing is the fact that there is no culture of acknowledgement, approval or appreciation.

### Subjective truth

One of the arguments for businesses doing performance appraisals is the belief that they provide "evidence" of an employee's performance. In reality, they deliver a highly subjective form of truth, not the truth. A manager's assessment of an employee's performance may not come anywhere close to the employee's own assessment of their performance and, often, it does not take into account the employee's world view.



So, if the current approach to performance appraisals is not working, what would be better?

### A new world view

In our view, it is not simply about redesigning the appraisal system because that is still operating within the same world view. It still assumes that there is a measurement of performance to be made. If we are to create a different business culture we need to shift our world view to something entirely different. We are not saying there is anything wrong in having conversations about how employees are getting on in the workplace, in fact conversation is a good thing. But we are saying there needs to be a very different way of having these conversations that is more empowering for employees and more useful for the business as a whole.

### Perception

InterBe recently advised an NHS organisation on how to replace performance appraisals with something more meaningful and empowering for individuals. One of the things we pointed out to them was that they needed to be aware that perception is at the heart of any appraisal and that it is important that everyone's perception is regarded as equally valid. The person doing the appraisal needs to adopt an attitude of curiosity and wanting to know more about what is being said, rather than standing in a place of judgement or blame. In this new paradigm, a manager is informed as much by the employee as the employee is by the manager.

We advise managers and employees to be aware that they bring their own interpretations and experiences to what is being said. Our advice is do not jump to conclusions without first checking out with the other person exactly what is being said and, in particular, what is being meant. While it is undoubtedly a manager's role to hold employees to account for their performance at work, this doesn't mean blaming them or making them wrong. If an employee is perceived as "failing", we would suggest that the manager might like to consider their own role in failing to inspire them.

### Being accountable

Of course, the responsibility doesn't lie solely with managers. Employees need to be willing to look at what it means to be accountable. We encourage them to make a declaration about the results they are willing generate and accepting that they will be held to account for that. It is also helpful if employees can avoid taking things personally and be willing to listen to the manager's suggestions.

How does InterBe approach the whole idea of appraising performance? We don't have a formal appraisal system. If someone in the team is struggling, they have permission at all times to share their weaknesses, to be vulnerable, to ask for help and support. We believe in reframing so-called "problems", in other words, looking at them from a different point of view. We are all available to one another at all times to share our expertise and support. There is definitely no hierarchy and this is an approach that works really well for us!

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