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## Getting Rid of Performance Ratings

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And the beat goes on. The same questions about performance appraisals keep popping up despite significant changes in work environments, contexts, and expectations over the past 2 or 3 decades (Adler et al., 2016). Even after decades of research and debate about the benefits and construction of performance appraisal ratings, no closure is reached or “best practice” identified. The application of ratings differs widely among companies, and the criteria, scaling, and language are tweaked by virtually every human resources group. In my experience, each organization believes that its performance criteria are unique. This should not be surprising because supervisors who observe and rate human performance do not react like a school of fish. What most human resources managers miss is that each of the supervisors who apply ratings are also unique, and they do not perceive performance consistently—except, perhaps, for the most exceptional and the poorest performers. Methods of quantifying or behaviorally slotting employee performance along a variety of dimensions to arrive at some accurate scaled rating have not made employees happy and are a painful chore for most supervisors.

There are some work situations where the key tasks are exceptionally intense and require extraordinary focus, like landing an airplane on an aircraft

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carrier, editing a strip of genetic material, or balancing oneself on a tower of people during a circus act. Tasks of this kind are so specific that the perceptual and behavioral sequence of steps to assure success can be observed, described, and scaled with great reliability and validity. This is not the case with employees in marketing, sales, research, the creative arts, teaching, finance, forestry, and most other kinds of work. In the case of almost all employees, there is no one way to complete a task because different people take different approaches to do something well, and the contexts in which work is accomplished varies enormously, often hour by hour or situation by situation. Most tasks require a degree of artfulness in addition to “best practices.” Employees and their supervisors will be the first ones to say that each situation is different and requires constant adaptability, flexibility, and even innovativeness.

Too many employees do not think that a single rating accurately captures their performance. They are right about this, and there is general discontent with ratings that are not in the upper end of a scale. It makes no sense to create a situation where many employees are informed that their supervisor does not think they are as good as they believe themselves to be. Because ratings are, after all, a judgment call on the part of a supervisor, why not make a different kind of judgment call to describe performance? One way to do this is with language to describe what a supervisor has observed, when it was observed, the results of that behavior (or application of skill or judgment), the side effects, the unintended consequences, the impact on others, and the relevance to specific organizational or unit goals. Of course, this requires supervisors to take notes occasionally to aid in recall; it means they have to consider what language to use to say what they think; it requires them to make suggestions on how to be more effective; and it requires them to be complimentary and to recognize effectiveness. The problem with this kind of performance feedback is that supervisors vary in their observational and descriptive skills, vary in their willingness to do this, and generally don't have the time or skills to follow up on these conversations. This, of course, is why there are so many forms that require scaled ratings that point back to the controversy about these ratings.

I believe there is a better way (Sorcher & Brant, 2002). It is the analogy of a process that I have used to accurately describe and predict executive behavior on an entire spectrum of individual performance. Although most of my evaluations, which I've called “The Group Evaluation,” have been with candidates for CEO and other senior executive positions, the process is parallel for the appraisals of other employees. Because the best performance evaluations are based on multiple criteria and multiple observers and are made by direct observation, over time and in different situations, enabling

these conditions in an employee appraisal is relatively simple. A supervisor calls together the group of people whom his direct reports collaborate with or inform on a regular or occasional basis (but not an appraisee's organizational subordinates or those who are simply work "associates"). It does not matter if the direct reports do not interact with all of the same people, but with rare exceptions all of them will interact with some or most of them: In the case of these exceptions, the supervisor will invite the individual or individuals who do interact with that employee. The supervisor, of course, interacts with each employee. This applies at every organizational level. Typically, the group will comprise three to six people in addition to the supervisor.

The individual assessment process described here is not the same as supervisor appraisals, 360 degree instruments, or even typical group-based or "crowdsourced" (peer) performance reviews. The literature contains many examples of these processes, ranging from the use of behavior-anchored scales to behavior observations scales to a dialogue between supervisor and direct report. What they have in common is that they conclude with forced final rankings or ratings—sometimes on each behavioral characteristic and generally in a specific category or quantified summary. The Group Evaluation provides no such conclusions—only a written narrative that captures how an individual's personal characteristics and abilities are perceived by others who engage in an exchange of relevant observations in response to a standardized set of questions.

The appraisal discussion of an employee is based on a set of relevant and behaviorally specific questions that the supervisor asks the group to answer about each of his or her direct reports. The ground rules are that responses and opinions must be based on direct observation with examples given. Each member of the group can probe for clarification or add a supporting or differing opinion or perspective. Comparisons among the employees are encouraged, along with evidence to support different opinions. To get a thorough understanding of the performance of each direct report will take about 3–4 hours for about six or eight individuals. This is a time-efficient appraisal for the supervisor, and it is not a time burden for the other evaluators even though they may be involved in as many as six or seven of these discussions each year. Perhaps best of all, ratings are not given to employees. Instead, performance feedback to them can consist of a verbal summary provided by their supervisor who tells them how they are viewed by others with whom they interact. Employees are not likely to be offended by a rating that they consider unfair, and the rankings can be used to substantiate merit pay increases.

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# Performance Appraisal in a Constantly Changing Work World

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Adler et al. (2016) present a comprehensive review of the fundamental and painful problems of performance appraisal in organizations, from which it appears that we cannot do without performance appraisal because of its benefits, and we cannot do with it because of its flaws. If so, how can organizations make a decision on this issue? Mend them or end them? (See also Culbertson, Krome, McHenry, Stetzer, & van Ittersum, 2013.)

The goal of this commentary is to suggest a performance appraisal of the kind that organizations can embrace, performance appraisal that is a personally customized appraisal, amenable, and appropriate to the constant changes in organizations' structure, in particular, and to the work world, in general.

In our opinion, the problems of the current form of performance appraisal stem mainly from two sources:

1. Performance appraisal is uniform and not personal. There is poor distinction between average employee performance and an employee's dynamic performance.
2. Performance appraisal in its current state does not suit the changing work world.

## Personalization of Performance Appraisal

### *Customizing Worker Appraisals*

In a world where so much has become customized to the individual—medical care adjusted to one's genetic profile, insurance policies determined by the insured's medical profile, training adapted to professional level

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