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## Why Performance Appraisal Does Not Lead to Performance Improvement: Excellent Performance as a Function of Uniqueness Instead of Uniformity

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Dissatisfaction with performance appraisal is at an all-time high (Adler et al., 2016). In this commentary we argue that one of the reasons why performance appraisal is unable to get the most out of employees is the way in which employees are evaluated against a uniform set of criteria, leading to a focus on deficits and little attention for unique individual qualities and strengths. By comparing the performance of an employee with a set of predetermined criteria, and by expecting the employee to perform well across all these criteria, the performance appraisal tends to focus on those areas where employees perform below the norm, irrespective of how excellently they may perform in other areas. For many employees, this leads to the frustrating experience that there is more attention for their weaknesses than for the areas in which they excel. By focusing on employee strengths and on how to make optimal use of those strengths, and by allowing for diversity in the way that employees execute their jobs, the performance review can be replaced by

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a dialogue about development that may truly stimulate the motivation for performance improvement.

### **Performance Appraisal**

The basis for performance appraisal lies in the common vacancy assumption that for each job an assembly of tasks exists prior to and independent of the traits of specific individual employees (Miner, 1987, 1991). Based on this assumption, employers first identify the characteristics of the vacancy and assess potential applicants against these criteria. After having selected the best candidate for the job, the candidate's performance is often managed with competency-, task-, or behavior-based rating scales that help managers to assess and develop employees against a fixed set of criteria (Hall, 2004). However, this approach can be criticized because employees may show excellent performances based on individual talents that may not come to the surface in the traditional method of identifying job relevant competencies or behaviors (Briscoe & Hall, 1999). Assessing performance against predefined criteria strives toward uniformity, comparing employees within the same job to the same golden standard, creating a focus on employee deficits that are seen to have the largest potential for performance improvement. This approach is understandable because human beings are preprogrammed to attend to and alleviate the effects of negative events that may lead to undesirable outcomes (Taylor, 1991). However, although overcoming weaknesses may be a "hygiene factor" that prevents underperformance in specific job tasks, it does not easily lead to higher levels of self-efficacy and positive affect, resulting in an excellent overall performance. Moreover, a focus on fixing employees' weaknesses may be frustrating, demoralizing, and demeaning for them because it implicitly asks them to be something they are not (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011).

In contrast to the vacancy assumption, focusing on employees' strengths and allowing for more diversity in the way employees execute their jobs are more in line with theories that acknowledge the active role that employees play in the design of their jobs and in the negotiation of their idiosyncratic employment arrangements (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010; Black & Ashford, 1995; Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006). An employee who is encouraged to play to her strengths may over time become visible and renowned by colleagues and managers, possibly leading to the crafting of an idiosyncratic job (Miner, 1987, 1991) around her strengths, making superior job performance even more feasible.

### **A Strengths-Based Alternative to Performance Appraisal**

In a strengths-based performance appraisal, the aim is to identify, appreciate, and develop the employee's qualities and to focus on how the employee can

utilize his or her unique qualities to contribute to the company goals. This does not mean that problematic performance can no longer be addressed or that managers can only be positive, even when they do not mean it. It does however mean that an effort needs to be made to discover the unique qualities of employees and to maximize the opportunity for employees to carry out work activities in a manner that plays to their strengths. Employee deficits do not automatically need to be translated into development goals. In some cases it might be necessary to remediate deficits to the level of acceptable performance. In other cases, however, it might be smarter to accept that an employee may never be an excellent performer in one specific aspect of his or her job and to manage around those weaknesses, for instance by letting two or more colleagues with complementary strengths join forces, such that they can complement each other's unique strengths. For example, to manage the interpersonal relations among the patients in her ward, a psychiatric nurse with a strength in zest and bravery might choose to engage in outdoor activities as a strategy that plays to her strengths, allowing her colleagues to take care of other tasks better done by them (e.g., organizing therapeutic group discussions). By taking an employee's talents and strengths as the starting point for a discussion on performance improvement, required development might be framed differently by the employee. For instance, once a researcher who is affirmed in her talent for applying advanced statistical techniques comes to realize that communicating these techniques to others might be the leverage competency that will allow her to apply her talents for statistics even more effectively, she might be more motivated to invest in developing these competencies.

Although personal strengths are trait-like characteristics that are energizing to the user (Linley & Harrington, 2006) and that allow people to perform at their personal best (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011), this does not mean that individuals are always aware of their strengths. Individual strengths might come so naturally to a person that they are often used unconsciously or might be perceived as "normal" or something that "everyone does." In fact, many employees cannot clearly identify their own strong points without help (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) and report not using their strengths very often at work (Buckingham, 2010). Instruments like the Strengthsfinder (Rath, 2007) and the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) may be helpful in discovering an individual's unique strengths. Alternatively, individuals may ask others for feedback about their "best-self," thereby composing their reflected best-self-portrait (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005). This mental representation about who one is at one's best is based on perceptions of how others view us and serves as an anchor for who we are and a guide for who we can become. Because feedback on one's best-self will encourage one to

act in line with one's best-self-concept, composing a best-self-portrait might lead to extraordinary performance.

Feedforward interviews (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011) present another interesting alternative to the performance review. In a feedforward interview, employees are invited to tell about an experience at work during which they felt energized before knowing the results of their actions. By analyzing the conditions in themselves, in others, and in the organization that allowed this peak moment to happen and by comparing this with current behavior and conditions at work, the beacons for flourishing at work can be made more visible. Similar to a classic performance appraisal, the feedforward interview still includes the creation of a discrepancy between a preferred standard and the actual state of affairs as a key ingredient of performance feedback. However, the feedforward interview overcomes the problems when this feedback is given by another person who applies an external standard and external information regarding the distance from the standard (Kluger & Van Dijk, 2010). Recalling an event that may be rare in an individual's work experience from his or her episodic memory may reveal new data that the individual never translated into a codified abstract theory of his or her more chronic behavior (semantic knowledge). This may create new insights regarding possible excellent performance and a discrepancy that is likely to motivate people to replicate and expand their best performance.

Findings from recent research support the emphasis on employee strengths and talents. For instance, a study by Meyers, van Woerkom, de Reuver, Bakk, and Oberski (2015) indicates that strengths provide a better starting point to build from than weaknesses. An intervention that stimulated the use of strengths led to much bigger increases in personal growth initiative compared with an intervention that stimulated development in the area of individual deficiencies. Using strengths brings about intrinsic motivation and steep learning curves (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which facilitate the intentional pursuit of growth activities. Moreover, working on strengths enhances self-efficacy, success expectations, perseverance, and resilience in coping with setbacks (Govindji & Linley, 2007), triggering proactive behaviors with regard to one's personal growth. Similarly, Hiemstra and Van Yperen (2015) show that strengths-based learning strategies lead to higher perceived competence and intrinsic motivation and, in turn, to more effort in professional development activities compared with deficit-based learning strategies. Moreover, employees who perceive organizational support for strengths use become more confident and engaged and as a result display higher levels of proactive behavior (Van Woerkom, Oerlemans, & Bakker, 2015) and performance (Van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015) and lower levels of absenteeism (Van Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2015).

### Strengths-Based Performance Appraisal and Inclusion

In addition to the argument that strengths-based performance appraisals lead to better performance compared with the classic performance review, these appraisals also support the political aim to shape the workplace into a place of inclusion where all employees (old and young, healthy and disabled) can participate. It would be unjust to evaluate all these employees by the same standards and to judge them for their inadequacies. This injustice grows even starker when we consider that 83% of companies link performance appraisals to compensation decisions (Mercer, 2013, as cited in Adler et al.). Instead of expecting the diverse workforce to meet all norms that allow for comparison, there should be room for diversity in the way people go about their work. While selecting new employees, attention should be given to the ways in which the employees' qualities could complement those of the existing team members. A software designer with Asperger's syndrome may be an excellent detector of programming errors but may be less fluent in communicating with his coworkers. A consultant may not be a great speaker to large audiences yet can be very effective in recruiting customers based on existing contacts. An older journalist may be less up-to-date with the rapid developments in social media but might possess an abundance of enthusiasm and experience that she can transfer to her younger coworkers. Diversity in the task execution is not a problem in a team where employees complement each other's qualities. Although the individual may have some flaws, the team will be strong.

### Conclusion

One of the explanations for the fact that performance reviews can be demotivating to even the highest performing employees (Aguinis, Joo, & Gottfredson, 2011; Culbertson, Henning, & Payne, 2013) is that performance review takes a "one size fits all" approach to talent, thereby focusing on employees' deficits and neglecting their unique qualities. By taking a more individual, tailor-made approach to employees' strengths, the tendency of performance evaluations to narrow the attention toward the negative aspects of performance can be counteracted while giving more room to performance improvement.

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## Genius or Folly? It Depends on Whether Performance Ratings Survive the “Psychological Immune System”

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### Do Employees Welcome or Reject Tough Feedback?

At the heart of the debate between Colquitt’s and Adler’s (Adler et al., [2016](#)) camps is a disagreement about the degree to which employees can be expected to respond favorably to challenging, negative, or critical feedback. Colquitt and colleagues argue that we often try and avoid blame, select jobs that don’t rate us against others, and respond unhappily to accurate appraisals. Adler and his collaborators, by contrast, are more optimistic. They point to how feedback drives us to seek new strategies, change our behavior, and improve our skills.

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