

Making the Most of Your Performance Appraisal

Say the words “performance appraisal” and you get any number of reactions. For some, the performance management process, which includes completion of the annual appraisal and a meeting between employee and manager, the appraisal is an opportunity to have a one-on-one, in depth conversation with your manager about your work; to identify and remove barriers to your job success; to improve future performance; to determine how you can contribute to the needs and goals of your department and the organization overall; and to seek specific support and guidance to achieve your individual job and/or career goals. In this example, both the employee and the manager are actively involved in the assessment of performance and the setting of goals.

For others, however, the appraisal process elicits a very different view. Common issues for employees being appraised include a lack of understanding of the appraisal process or format; the assumption that the evaluation will be negative or that even constructive criticism is negative; a fear of surprises; concern for changes in the relationship with the supervisor; a fear of failure, which might include a threat to reputation and self-image; no follow up by manager; that the appraisal becomes part of one’s file; and the fear of change. Common issues for managers include feeling uncomfortable talking about performance; that disagreements will be confrontational; that the process is too time consuming; a fear of surprises; and concern for possible negative consequences for the relationship with the employee.

Why are the experiences so vastly different? What is it about the process and the relationship between the employee and the manager that makes the experience different? A number of factors contribute to how we, as an employee, evaluate the overall experience of the appraisal process, including the appraisal outcome, the procedure used, and the interpersonal interaction between employee and manager, including how active we are in the process.

Appraisal outcomes include the performance rating or score, the information contained in the appraisal, and, if applicable, the pay increase associated with the appraisal. In other words, was the outcome expected?

We also evaluate the appraisal experience based on the procedures used; we evaluate whether the policies and rules were consistently applied within the department, across other employees, and across time; the accuracy of information used to evaluate our performance; whether the decision making structure regarding the appraisal and pay was clearly identified; and if there is an opportunity to rebut and/or change the manager's evaluation. We evaluate the procedures separate from the outcome, so even a disappointing outcome can be "acceptable" when the procedures used to determine the outcome are fair.

Finally, we evaluate the appraisal experience in terms of our interpersonal interaction with our manager. Specifically, we evaluate the quality of the interaction in relation to the manager's perceived truthfulness; the level of respect shown us; the propriety of the manager's statements and questions; and the manager's justification(s) for decisions made. This evaluation is separate from the evaluations of outcome and procedure, and the factor that has the most lasting effect for future evaluations and the relationship between manager and employee.

An effective appraisal process, then, is one that takes into consideration the outcomes, the procedures, and the interpersonal interaction between manager and employee. That might suggest that the manager and organization alone have all the responsibility; however, based on the experience of those who view the appraisal process as an opportunity, we, as employees, must be an active participant in the process.

What is My Role as an Employee in the Performance Appraisal?

The following are recommendations, from a number of sources, to help you take a more active role in your performance appraisal. Some of the recommendations will require you to start

talking with your manager now about your next appraisal; others will be relevant as we get closer to the appraisal period on campus.

- Be aware of your existing feelings and concerns about the appraisal process, and discuss them with your manager. What worked well for you in previous appraisals? What hasn't worked well in the past? Would a discussion with your manager now about that help prepare you both for the next one?

- Prepare for the appraisal process. (1) Do you have a copy of your job description and the appraisal document to be completed and submitted to HR? If not, ask for that information. To be an active participant and to limit surprise, you need a clear understanding of your job requirements and the standards to be used for evaluating your performance. (2) Maintain your own records. Collect memos, letters of recognition, warnings, past appraisals, productivity reports, time sheets, and the like for the upcoming appraisal period. We shouldn't expect our managers to know or remember everything we did during the appraisal period. Therefore, it is up to us to ensure the manager has the information relevant to our performance. (3) Prepare a list of issues or concerns you want to address in the meeting. Ask yourself, "what do I need to do my job more effectively" and "are there any barriers preventing me from doing my job?"

- Reduce defensiveness. This is a tough one, particularly if previous performance appraisals have not been effective. Defensiveness is a fear-based reaction intended to protect us from a perceived threat. We take our jobs seriously and personally, making it more difficult to hear others' comments about our work, particularly when those remarks are critical. Even constructive criticism is often hard to hear. While everyone gets defensive sometimes, feelings of ongoing defensiveness can actually be a health hazard—defensiveness is associated with elevated blood pressure. So, remind yourself that nobody is perfect, and nobody is the absolute worst. If you find yourself feeling defensive when you talk with your manager about your performance, ask him/her to clarify his/her comments. Ask for specific examples and instances of what s/he is talking about. Then, listen openly to the information the manager provides. If you are feeling particularly defensive, it might be best to ask to reschedule the

meeting.

- Listen carefully. Listening is a skill that can be improved. Most of us believe that we are good listeners; unfortunately, most of us are not as good as we think. To listen carefully, we must withhold judgment about what the other person is saying. Your listening goal should be to seek understanding. Take notes. Repeat what you heard for clarification. You want the other person to extend the same consideration to you later.
- State disagreements in the appraisal in factual behavioral terms. Provide support for your disagreements, including examples and documentation. The records you've kept for yourself might be needed now. Stay focused on work behaviors. If you are feeling upset or angry or defensive, it might be best to ask to meet again at a later time in the day or in a few days.
- Help set goals. Performance goals should meet three criteria; they should be measurable, meaningful, and reasonably attainable. A goal of "improved reporting" is highly ambiguous. Which reports? What specific improvements are required? Have reports been incomplete? Late? Insufficient? How will improvement be measured? Are the goals realistic? Do you have the qualifications and training to meet the goal? Do you have the authority and resources to achieve the desired goal? If not, the goal is not realistic.
- Seek professional development advice. If you want to be considered for a transfer or a promotion, find out what will be required and develop short- and long-term goals with the assistance of your manager. Together, identify resources that might be available on and off campus to help you reach your goals.

In closing, the performance appraisal process should be one of open communication between employee and manager. Taking an active and ongoing role is important for your satisfaction in the process and in the accuracy of the appraisal.

If you'd like additional information on making the most of your performance appraisal or have specific concerns about your own performance appraisal or, if you are a manager and

have questions or want to discuss concerns about the appraisal process, please contact the ombudsman (Kerry Egdorf at 288.7041 or ombuds@marquette.edu), or Human Resources.