31 Problems with traditional performance appraisals in Higher Education

Time to think differently?

Many of the assumptions upon which performance appraisals are built do not match up with the way real people operate in HE today. They are based on outdated ways of working that do not emphasise the three things all people want in the workplace to perform exceptionally:

Control, Autonomy, Mastery

1. **Don't assess actual performance**. Most of the assessment that managers complete focus on "the person," including characterisations of their personal "traits" (i.e. commitment), knowledge (i.e. technical knowledge) or behaviors (i.e. attendance). While these factors may contribute to performance, they are not measures of actual output. If you want to assess the person, call it "person appraisal." Performance is output quality, volume, and responsiveness.
2. **Infrequent feedback.** If the primary goal of the process is to identify and resolve performance issues, executing the process annually simply can't work. A high quality assessment program needs to work as close to real time as possible.
3. **Over reliance on memory**. Most processes rely on the memory of those completing the assessment over a long period of time. As a result assessment criteria are unclear and subjective.
4. **Lack of effective metrics**. Many accept that the goals of the process are to recognise results, provide feedback to address weaknesses and determine training needs. Unfortunately, rarely is the contribution by the member of staff to attaining any of these goals actually assessed. Instead, the most common measure relating to performance appraisal is the percentage completed.
5. **Lack of accountability**. Managers are not measured or held accountable for providing accurate feedback. While they may be viewed poorly for achieving low completion rates, there is no sanction for doing a poor review job.
6. **Disconnected from rewards**. Progression and promotion, and often training opportunities are completely disconnected from performance assessment, for many (not all) this is a problem. Without this some employees and managers will not take the process seriously.
7. **Simply not the right place.** We have fallen into a trap of 'shoehorning' performance discussions into a process that was not created with this intention. The basis of most appraisal processes in the public sector is one of career development, training and barrier-identification. As a result, introducing performance discussions once a year within the same format simply does not work.
8. **Forced processes don't work**. Many believe that we need a centrally organised 'compulsory' process. It is generally not the case that forced processes work well - you didn't like being forced at school, and you don't like it any better now**.** Cooperation is earned through such things as emotional support, encouragement, or an exciting vision, as well as choices about how to get feedback and what to do with it. Any 'process' needs to be

more fluid than this and make people 'want' to take part because they see a reason for doing so.

9. **No comprehensive team assessment.** Although individuals on the team are assessed, there is no simultaneous overall assessment of the team's contribution to common goals.
10. **A focus on 'weakness'.** Most performance appraisal systems focus on weak performers. There is significantly less focus on top performers and thus there is no system to capture their best practices and then to share them with others.
11. **Assessments are kept secret.** Whilst elements of confidentiality are important, an overemphasis on privacy concerns might allow managers to play favourites, to discriminate, and to be extremely subjective. Keeping everything secret can allow managers to avoid open conversations about equity.
12. **Process has no internal currency.** Limited real impact means that often the process is not seen as adding any value not only by staff but also senior managers. Often senior managers will say it's important, but when pushed to demonstrate the real value it adds, they struggle.
13. **No process goals.** The overall process operates without clear and measurable goals, and as a result there is little focus. We ask people to set objectives within the process, but the process itself lacks objectives
14. **Doesn't address role diversity.** All too often, the same appraisal form is applied to a large but not homogeneous group of employees. As a result, the assessment form does not fit the job. Only management-by-objective-type approaches linked to flexible technology can address individual needs.
15. **The process does not flex with the organisation.** Rarely does any portion of the appraisal process flex to address changing organisational and team objectives. A paper driven process makes any level of agility almost impossible
16. **Disconnected from job descriptions**. In many cases, the factors assessed are completely different from the factors on an employee's job description.
17. **Over focus on the individual**. A focus on individuals can add performance improvements. However a focus on widespread work processes, systems and team contribution can add large improvements. Most processes allow little acknowledgement of the contribution of 'team' towards goals. Doing this moves emphasis away from individuals and towards contribution towards team goals.
18. **Managers are not trained on the right things**. In most organisations, managers are not trained on how to assess and give honest feedback. If the process includes a career development component, it is even more likely that managers will not know how to enhance the career path of their employees. Goal setting linked to team and organisational objectives is lacking. This is often because managers are not also given the right 'tools' to do the job properly.
19. **Managers avoid confrontation.** Some managers will do almost anything to avoid tough decisions or confrontation. However that is often because they (quite understandably) have no objective process against which to judge people. If there is a ratings process some provide no differentiation and spread awards evenly to avoid it, while others give everyone "above average" ratings. Some managers will provide feedback that is extremely vague in order not to offend anyone.
20. **Recency errors.** Managers have a tendency to evaluate based primarily on events that occurred during the last few months as there is no 'live' method of recording performance.
21. **Corporate culture issues.** Rigid and subjective appraisal processes can be a barrier to cultural change in organisations.
22. **Inconsistency across managers.** Some managers are naturally "easy raters" while others are not. Without a subjective assessment linked to real goals inconsistency is guaranteed in large organisations. Most people have a tendency to rate people like themselves more positively. This can result in discrimination issues.

23. **Managers don't own it.** Managers often feel they don't own the process, so they invest little in it and proceed to blame HR for everything. Managers would embrace it instead of grumbling if they were presented with a positive reason to engage i.e it has an impact on team success.
24. **High anxiety.** Not surprising really as the process is so subjective, undertaken at best once a year, with no benchmark performance criteria set out in advance. Uncertainty can cause many employees high levels of anxiety weeks before the process. Managers may also be anxious because of the uncertainty related to an employee's reaction.
25. **No alerts.** Most processes do not allow an employee to be notified midstream should their performance change to the point where it was suddenly dramatically below standards.
26. **No choice of reviewers.** Unlike with 360 reviews (which tend to be reserved for senior staff), employees are not allowed input into who contributes to their assessment.
27. **Retention issues.** The ultimate cost of a poor assessment may be that it actually drives away top staff because they have seen no differential in recognition and rewards for superior performance.
28. **Negative consequences.** A poor process will result in decreased in employee engagement, trust, employer 'brand' strength, teamwork, and innovation contribution.
29. **A time-consuming process.** Most of the forms are incredibly long and time-consuming. As a result, some managers routinely recycle "last year's" evaluations.
30. **It is too historical.** The process is focused on capturing feedback about last year rather than on discussing necessary changes to job and skill requirements needed by the organisation moving forward
31. **Not coordinated with planning cycles.** Many do not coincide with planning periods or seasons when all other organisational results are tabulated and reported.