

The Performance Appraisal Interview: A Multi-Purpose Communication Assignment

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The performance appraisal has become a standard topic in the business or management curriculum, most frequently covered in personnel, management, human resources, or organizational behavior classes. Students learn such things as the types of employee appraisal systems, how to create appraisal instruments, and how performance appraisals fit into the larger employment cycle. What these students seldom have an opportunity to acquire or to practice, however, are the specific communication skills necessary to effectively implement the systems they study. However knowledgeable our graduates may be in the principles and theory of performance appraisal, their ability to effectively execute these systems, particularly under difficult circumstances, is often limited unless they have acquired accompanying competence in oral and written communication.

Importantly, the communication skills and attitudes most critical to effective performance appraisal are the same skills and attitudes that are needed in a wide range of other on-the-job management communication situations. Students who develop the communication competencies necessary for conducting challenging performance appraisals will be well-served as they train, coach, counsel, direct, and motivate employees in other daily work contexts.

A brief examination of the goals and methods of performance appraisal may be helpful in providing a context for the following assignment, which is designed to help students choose and practice some of the most essential management communication skills and strategies. Further information may be found in Dessler (1983), Napier and Latham (1986), Smith (1986), DeGregorio and Fisher (1988), and Mohrmann, Resnick-West, & Lawler (1989).

PERFORMANCE APPRAISALS

Performance appraisals have become a primary management tool for improving employee performance, setting total quality standards, and communicating organizational values. Although the performance appraisal serves several functions, its primary purpose is to improve individual performance, most often through

- a. Clarifying job requirements and standards
- b. Providing feedback to the employee regarding his or her progress toward meeting these standards
- c. Guiding future performance by formulating an action- plan and allocating rewards and opportunities.

An effective appraisal, therefore, accomplishes a variety of specific tasks while maintaining a positive relationship between the supervisor and the employee. The difficulty of this task, from the manager's viewpoint, is largely dependent upon the type of appraisal interview required. In some cases, employee performance is satisfactory and the managers goal is to either help the employee maintain his or her current level of performance (when no promotion is possible) or to assist in the development of a realistic career path. The interview assignment as described below, however, pertains only to those situations where performance is unsatisfactory. The management task is to communicate performance problems to an employee who, for any number of reasons, may not be completely receptive to the manager's efforts.

In preparation for the appraisal interview, managers assemble and review all relevant data, make decisions regarding various aspects of the appraisal itself, and prepare the employee for the up-coming meeting. Of the wide range of appraisal methods, the three most frequently used instruments are rating scales, critical incidents, or a combination of the two called behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS). BARS anchor the points of the rating scale with fictional sample critical incidents—examples of what the employee's performance looks like for each value of the rating scale and for each dimension being evaluated. On a five-point scale covering typing accuracy, for instance, the critical incident for 1 may be “the employee submits work with approximately an error per page at least half of the time.” The highest

rating, 5, would indicate that “the employee not only types with nearly 100 percent accuracy, but also identifies errors in documents for which he or she is not directly responsible.” Although some organizations use self-rating systems as well, most studies indicate that this practice is dangerous. Since ratings are usually tied to compensation, employees consistently tend to rate themselves higher than do their supervisors.

In accomplishing their task, managers strive to be objective and concrete. They also realize that behavioral change is unlikely to occur unless the employee feels that he or she was involved in the process. Consequently, it is essential that opportunities for dialogue be created. One-way communication in the performance appraisal interview is almost certain to have an unsatisfactory outcome. Through the use of open-ended and probing questions, an objective, unbiased attitude, and nonjudgmental language, managers can encourage their employees to engage in problem solving. In fact, one study found that regardless of the outcome of the appraisal, employees felt satisfied with the interview if their manager was supportive and if they had an opportunity to present their ideas and feelings. Improved employee performance was most likely to occur if a concrete action plan was also established.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Communicating performance problems is always a difficult task. In classroom settings, however, students often depend upon routine, comfortable responses that do not provide opportunities to handle the difficult and unanticipated dynamics that provide the most useful learning experience. This assignment encourages students to create unique, thought-provoking scenarios that provide exceptionally rich experiences for students and instructor alike (Figure 1).

The performance appraisal assignment accomplishes four major objectives within the framework of almost any course in business or managerial communication. It provides students with an opportunity to

1. Practice their interpersonal communication skills, particularly those associated with nonverbal communication, constructive feedback, active listening, response styles, and conflict management.
2. Receive feedback on their interpersonal communication skills.
3. Create written documents that have a clearly defined purpose and reader.
4. Develop an appropriate communication strategy (involving the creation and timing of both oral and written communication) for accomplishing a specified goal.
5. Examine communication issues involved in conducting employee appraisals.

Procedure

The assignment allows students to select and practice key communication skills in an important and relatively complex context. Although students who have addressed the principles and theory of performance appraisal in earlier classes may be able to enrich this activity in ways that those without this background cannot, the appraisal interview is conceived as a vehicle, not an end in itself. Knowledge of appraisal systems, therefore, is not prerequisite for this assignment and lack of this knowledge in no way diminishes the learning outcomes in a communication-based course.

It is important that you make the objectives of the activity clear and introduce the assignment one to two weeks before the in-class performances so that students have time to thoughtfully prepare their materials and to review the documents produced by their partners. Figure 2 identifies the major components of the assignment and provides a generic time line to assist in planning student activities and deadlines. The second column in Figure 2 suggests ways in which those who have larger classes or less time to devote to the activity might modify the basic plan. A list of assignments that embellish the activity is also provided. Ideally, you should ask each student to play two roles: an employee who has a performance problem and a manager who conducts the appraisal.

Employee Role

In preparation for the role of employee, each student submits both a general description of an organization and a job description. Organizations can range from high technology companies to academic institutions to fast food restaurants; jobs can range from an orderly to a secretary, from a member of a waitstaff to a line worker in a manufacturing plant. It is important that the job description be as thorough and as detailed as possible, including both required competencies and responsibilities, and that students feel comfortable with the positions they select. Although in many cases students will not have had actual work experience related to the positions they choose, the more familiar they are with the jobs the better able they are to perform authentic and meaningful role plays.

You can readily adapt the assignment to communication courses offered in specialized business or management programs where a particular set of jobs may be very appropriate and familiar. In some cases, you might prefer to specify the type of organization students use—e.g., manufacturing, service, international, academic, and so on. In other cases, it may be appropriate to assign students to specific organizations or to specific jobs.

Model job descriptions are helpful to students as they prepare their own materials. Participants may also find it challenging to be given real employment documents from which to develop their assignments. Most businesses are more than willing to share employment materials, and samples of both job descriptions and appraisal forms can be obtained easily. Other samples, which may need to be embellished by the student, can be collected from the classified section of newspapers and magazines. You can save class time by supplying students with copies of near-final documents.

In addition to producing descriptions of the job and the organization, each student chooses from Figure 3 a specific set of personality characteristics that he or she will assume during the simulation. These profiles—each problematic in its own way—ensure that each interview will have a unique dynamic and serve two purposes within the context of the appraisal process. First, and most importantly, they provide a basis upon which the manager can identify potential performance problems. Second, by virtue of their problematic natures, the profiles ensure that each interview will have a unique dynamic and

challenge students in the manager role to apply their communication skills in a more complex setting. Employees choose the set of traits they believe they can successfully portray. Again, you can modify the assignment by creating additional profiles or by asking students to develop their own set of characteristics.

Two copies of the descriptions of the organization and job descriptions, along with the selected personality profiles, are due at least one week before in-class performances are scheduled to begin. At this time, students are paired and each class member receives the descriptions and a personality profile from his or her partner. Ideally, you should assign students to different partners for each of their two roles. You may want to withhold the names of students' partners until the day of the appraisal to ensure that none of the interviews has been rehearsed. Unlike other communication assignments where practice is encouraged, effective interpersonal communication requires students to respond appropriately to the immediate and unexpected dynamics of a situation. One of the main purposes of this assignment is to challenge students to apply their communication skills in a somewhat problematic, unstructured setting. Although managers plan an overall strategy for conducting the interviews and attempt to anticipate employee responses, their ability to adapt and modify their behaviors within the interview context cannot be practiced or assessed unless the encounter is unrehearsed. It is precisely this spontaneous aspect that makes these interviews such a valuable learning experience.

Upon receiving the descriptions and profiles, students can begin the final stage of their preparation: taking the role of manager to develop the performance problem and complete the written performance appraisal.

Manager Role

When a student receives a copy of the materials developed by an "employee" classmate, his or her task as manager is to become familiar with the position and its requirements, and then to envision the specific *performance problems* that might result when an employee with that particular profile performs the specified job. If, for instance, a student were presented with a Personality Profile A employee (lacks initiative, looking for a better job, little intrinsic motivation, needs the money) in the position of sales

clerk, a wide variety of potential performance problems might come to mind. This individual is likely to arrive late to work, take advantage of opportunities to get out of work, resist taking on any additional responsibilities, and so on. Due to his or her tendency to be hot-tempered and defensive, a front desk employee at a hotel with Personality Profile B might have difficulties dealing with guests' complaints or working effectively with members of other departments such as rooms or sales. An employee with Personality Profile D would create any number of job-related problems if he or she had to work closely with other members of a team.

With the performance problems in mind, each manager completes a written appraisal of the employee's performance. Although a sample appraisal form is provided (Figure 4), students might obtain forms from organizations similar to the ones in which the employees they appraise would be working. The more realistic the appraisal materials, the more helpful the simulation will be to students. Depending upon the amount of class time available, written appraisals may or may not be shared with employees prior to the interview.

After determining the most likely performance problems and filling out the appraisal form, students then develop a communication strategy for addressing these problems with the employee. This task is further complicated by the employee's personality profile. Although the focus of a performance appraisal is on clearly identifying and communicating information regarding an employee's job-related behavior, this assignment also serves as a vehicle for students to (1) demonstrate a wide variety of communication skills in response to largely unanticipated scenarios, and (2) decide the appropriateness of various behaviors in meeting specific individual and situational requirements. Hence, the personality profile adds a secondary dimension to the appraisal task as it encourages students to continuously adapt to their partners as they create lively, challenging dialogues.

Instructions for the Interview

Managers prepare for the interview by considering the available information and carefully planning a communication strategy that accomplishes the goals of the assignment:

1. Create goodwill and a climate that facilitates constructive feedback.
2. Reaffirm or agree on job requirements and performance standards.
3. Communicate a performance problem to the employee where behaviors do not meet established standards.
4. Assist the employee in setting personal goals and in creating an action plan.
5. Motivate the employee to meet performance goals.

Depending upon the length of time allowed for each interview, you can either embellish the assignment by including additional aspects of traditional appraisals or focus them more narrowly. If your time is short, adjust by assigning only the first three tasks: creating goodwill, clarifying expectations, and clearly communicating the performance problem so that the employee understands exactly what behaviors need to be modified.

These encounters can easily be limited to five minutes, which is a sufficient period to enable managers to experience some of the challenges of their appraisal task. Students should be warned in advance, however, that they may need to be stopped before they have put closure on their discussion. Assessment of students' oral performances, then, may most profitably be based on how appropriately students respond to what happens within the context of the interview rather than on their ability to progress from A to B within a particular time frame.

In addition, rather than facilitating a general class discussion after each interview, you can reduce the time required by discussing performances in sets focused around common issues or themes, such as use of nonverbal communication, conflict management skills, or the clarity with which performance information was presented. Recurring questions should be

- What response did the manager make?
- What was the consequence?
- What were his or her alternatives?
- What variables did he or she need to consider?

- Was the response that was provided the most appropriate one?

Although somewhat less desirable, class members may be limited to experiencing just one role—either manager or employee—rather than both.

Some students may be uncomfortable with the fishbowl situation created by classmate observers. This issue is best dealt with openly when the assignment is presented. Clearly, almost all in-class activities have some artificial aspects, and the performance appraisal is no exception. It is essential for observers to be present, however, because in this assignment the learning experience comes as much from observation and subsequent discussion of the issues that arise as from the actual experience of the interview itself. Due to its nature, the interviews are particularly rich when processed. Unlike assignments that are more predictable, the appraisal interviews lend themselves to dynamic discussion regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of the communication strategies employed.

Specific Skills and Principles Addressed

The performance appraisal interview is a perfect forum for students to demonstrate the interpersonal communication skills they have practiced throughout the course in a dynamic and challenging setting. You may want to videotape the role plays so that students can view and analyze their communication behaviors. Ideally, a separate tape should be used for each interview so that students can view their performances immediately and complete a pencil and paper self-assessment instrument with their partners (Figure 5). Among the most apparent communication dimensions that might be addressed are the following:

1. **Nonverbal communication.** Immediately, students become aware of their nonverbal communication, particularly as they role play various employee personalities. Clear contrasts can be made between, for instance, personality profiles A and D. “Managers” can focus on their use of eye contact, gestures, and posture during the interview. In addition, you can ask students to strategically design elements of the nonverbal environment to contribute toward accomplishing their objectives. Such aspects as the specific seating arrangement as well as the manager’s attire

and nonverbal behavior work together to establish various important elements of the relationship, such as degree of status, formality, and extent of participation.

2. **Active listening.** Listening is a key communication skill for conducting an effective performance appraisal. Managers' nonverbal as well as verbal responses can be discussed in terms of the "listening environment" that was created. Did the manager create a supportive and open climate by paraphrasing and perception checking? Did he or she provide reinforcement to the employee, or was he or she evaluative and judgmental?
3. **Feedback.** Were the rules of constructive feedback followed? Did the manager provide useful, descriptive, specific information to the employee? Was an environment created that allowed the employee to be open and receptive to the information?
4. **Response styles.** Defensive and supportive behaviors can be discussed as they affect manager/employee interactions. What did or could the manager do to reduce emotional responses and encourage the employee to focus on his or her performance issues? Did the manager encourage two-way communication, or was the interview a monologue? Were the types of questions the manager asked appropriate?
5. **Conflict management.** Each of the employee profiles suggests that some type of conflict will arise between the manager and his or her subordinate. You might ask students to identify the anticipated conflict and then comment on whether or not it was effectively handled within the context of the interview. Did the manager directly address the conflict or problem, or did he or she avoid or smooth over the issue? Was problem-solving collaborative, or one-sided?

Written Documents

Students practice their written communication skills as they prepare the initial organization and job descriptions, complete the appraisal form, and also as they create related documents. Assignments can be simple or elaborate; the company description, for instance, might be a list of characteristics or could be expanded into a public relations brochure.

In this assignment, the written appraisal is given to the employee prior to the interview. However, students might consider the consequences of sharing or not sharing the appraisal document before the actual meeting. Since writing about performance problems requires sophisticated handling of tone, you could display sample responses to questions in the final section of the appraisal for all students to review. Their impact on the employee can be discussed in terms of both task (form, clarity, organization) and relationship language, tone) dimensions.

You can create any number of writing assignments to embellish the assignment. Managers can be asked to write a memo reminding employees of the up-coming appraisal and recommending how they might best prepare for the encounter. Another writing assignment might be a letter to the employee summarizing the results of the performance appraisal and the goals that have been agreed upon.

Discussion Opportunities

In addition to skill development, the performance appraisal interview provides a rich source of material for discussion. Keeping in mind the stated goals of the performance appraisal interview, you might facilitate a discussion regarding what types of information or documents to give the employee in advance of the interview, how to open the interview, and how to select and sequence the points that need to be covered. Students might also pursue such questions as the following:

- a. **What is the relationship between written and oral communication?** The various written documents that surround the performance appraisal provide opportunities for students to discuss issues related to planning, permanence, formality, clarity, relationship building, and soon. What would happen if the performance appraisal were only in writing, with no interview component? What potential problems could arise if nothing was documented and the only formal communication was the meeting between the manager and employee? The functions of the oral and written channels become apparent through an examination of performance appraisal documents and tasks.
- b. **How can you identify performance problems while still motivating the employee?** Students benefit from discussing the importance of constructive feedback and developing a supportive

communication climate. They also learn from examining the differences as well as the similarities among employees with regard to motivation. Discussions might begin with each manager completing statements such as “The employee I appraised is motivated by...” and “To avoid causing defensiveness when I present the performance problem, I have to...” This renewed “audience awareness” will be helpful in all subsequent communication tasks.

- c. **How can diversity issues such as language barriers, nonverbal indicators, and value conflicts be accommodated?** The cross-cultural dimension is a vital issue in all discussions throughout this assignment. Students must quickly recognize and identify problems created by cultural differences in nonverbal communication, the meanings of words, or values. Although care must be taken to avoid stereotypes, communication and mutual understanding can only be facilitated by a heightened awareness of how culture influences perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. The use of specific incidents as catalysts for discussion is a helpful technique. A student critical of the lack of eye contact from his or her employee, for instance, might be asked how this behavior would be interpreted if the employee was Asian, an Arab, or a Native American.
- d. **What ethical issues might arise in a performance appraisal?** Ethical issues, like issues of cross-cultural communication, are best addressed as a theme that runs throughout all communication activities. What happens, for instance, when you have a high performing employee who has bluntly told you that he or she is looking to take over *your* job? Your supervisor depends upon your appraisal to make promotion decisions. You are happy right where you are for the time being. What do you do? Or perhaps the employee naively tells you about some illegal or unethical activity he or she is engaged in. Are you obligated to share the information?

CONCLUSION

Few communication activities require the range of skill and strategy needed for conducting effective performance appraisals. The challenge is increased further when employees do have significant performance problems, and when these problems must be clearly communicated to individuals who may be defensive, indifferent, or present any number of other challenges in the communication setting. Behavioral flexibility, a valued communication competence that is often discussed but infrequently demonstrated or assessed, can be realized within the context of the performance appraisal. Minor modifications in the appraisal assignment will enable educators to focus on any number of specific communication concerns, from nonverbal cues to constructive feedback to listening behavior. The wide variety of written assignments that emerge from the performance appraisal setting make it an ideal context in which to discuss the functions of both oral and written communication.

If business communication educators are to assist students in performing the most essential management tasks, they will find few more vital or complex contexts than the performance appraisal. Effective managers who search for ways to empower employees and create learning cultures will discover that the performance appraisal is one of their most potent tools. Through effective appraisal, employees acquire the skills, attitudes, and values that will distinguish high performance in the decades ahead.

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SAMPLE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL ASSIGNMENT

You will participate in two interviews; one in the role of manager, the other in the role of employee.

YOUR ROLE AS MANAGER

You are the _____ manager at a 400-room hotel and directly supervise nine employees. *You will receive a description of the hotel, a detailed job description, and a personality profile from the employee you are going to appraise. From the description and the personality type he or she has created (and by considering the location of your hotel, its market, and so on), identify some ^eaV* areas of concern with regard to job performance. You must develop and describe in detail at least one serious performance problem.*

Written Assignments

1. **The written appraisal.** An appraisal instrument is attached for your convenience; *please feel free to modify it as necessary.* Be as realistic as possible in determining what types of problems this individual might be experiencing. Complete the appraisal carefully; it will be given to the employee and to your supervisor several days prior to your interview. Pay special attention to details of performance that will enable you to follow the principles of constructive feedback as well as to the tone of your writing. Remember: *Two copies* of your assessment instrument are due in class a week before the interview. One will be submitted to your instructor, the other is for the employee.
2. **Memo.** Within a week of this interview, you will *summarize the major outcomes* in a memo to the employee. A copy will go into his/her permanent file. Your supervisor will get a copy of all appraisal documents.
3. **Self Assessment.** Within a week of your interview, you are to view the videotape of your appraisal with your employee and, after viewing, complete and submit the self-assessment provided.

The Appraisal Interview

Your specific tasks during the interview itself include

1. Facilitating agreement regarding performance expectations—job requirements and standards.
2. Identifying and clarifying areas of unsatisfactory performance.
3. Establishing clear performance goals and an action plan.
4. Reinforcing effective performance.

Throughout the conversation, you will work to maintain a positive relationship with your employee and do whatever is appropriate to create a supportive communication climate.

YOUR ROLE AS EMPLOYEE

Describe the Organization and the Job

You are an employee at a 400-room property. Determine where this hotel is located, what its target market would be, what its mission is, what facilities it offers, and other relevant information. *Write a one-page description of the organization.*

Then, select an area (food and beverage, personnel, front desk, housekeeping, and so on) with which you have a reasonable amount of familiarity, and *create a detailed job description* to give to your manager, who will be conducting your performance appraisal.

Select a Personality Profile

You will be asked to assume a particular personality for this interview, one that clearly contributes to the performance problems your supervisor will identify. Personality profiles are listed on the attached sheet; *choose one that you believe is most appropriate and most interesting, given your particular situation.* From your job description and the profile you select, your manager will create at least one performance problem and communicate it to you, first in writing as a performance appraisal document, and then in an appraisal interview. You and your manager will then work toward clarifying the problems, finding possible solutions to these problems, and defining future performance goals. You must remain in your “assumed” personality at all times, responding as you imagine an employee with the particular traits you have chosen would respond.

MODIFYING THE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL ASSIGNMENT

(This chart assumes that classes meet two or three times each week.)

	Core Plan	Modified Plan	Additional
Week 1	Discuss performance appraisal Explain assignment and distribute materials	Discuss performance appraisal Explain assignment and distribute materials	Distribute prepared materials (organization and job descriptions, evaluation form, etc.) and assignments
Week 2	Emp. Turn in 2 copies of job description: choose profile Mgt: Create and complete written appraisal	Mgr: Complete written appraisal Student plays one role but prepare all written materials	Mgr: Memo to employee helping him/her prepare for interview
Week 3	Begin Interviews (approx. 8-10 min. each)	Finish interviews	Videotape Mgr: Submit copy of written appraisal to employee in advance Emp: Prepare self-assessment
Week 4	Finish interviews		Mgr: Write report for employee file, including goals and action plan

EMPLOYEE PERSONALITY PROFILES

Although the profiles that appear below are somewhat stereotypical, you are likely to discover employees who “fit” each description in any organization. The profiles will help generate the *types* of problems you will encounter when you conduct the employee appraisal.

Profile A

- lazy, lacks initiative
- looking for a better job
- little intrinsic motivation; needs money
- not on top of the situation, never has details

Profile B

- family problems, former alcoholic
- hot-tempered
- defensive, does not admit mistakes (rationalizes, blames)
- “forgets” easily, irresponsible

Profile C

- agrees with everything, avoids conflict
- does not follow through on tasks or commitments
- indecisive
- lacks respect from peers and guests

Profile D

- political-minded
- ambitious, accomplishes personal goals at others* expense
- high need for control
- self-serving, often described as insincere
- smooth, polished interpersonal skills

Profile E

- individual from another culture
- poor language skills, limited vocabulary
- does not aspire to advance in position
- puts family first, always
- values job relationships to the detriment of accomplishing job tasks

Profile F

- hard-worker, conscientious
- easily confused, does not see the “big picture”
- takes job one day at a time, no long-range goals
- avoids responsibility, dislikes any change

Profile G

- young, insecure
- overly friendly with other employees
- poor time-management skills, very reactive
- cannot identify problems; dependent

PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL SELF-ASSESSMENT: MANAGER ROLE

View the videotape of your performance appraisal with your partner. Then, respond to the following questions. Submit a copy of your assessment to your instructor within one week of your in-class role play.

1. Carefully observe your nonverbal communication. How did it contribute or detract from establishing rapport with the employee?
2. Did you listen carefully to the employee? What responses indicate that effective listening took place?
3. How did you plan to adapt to or accommodate your style to your employee's personality characteristics? Were you effective in this effort? Why or why not?
4. Were there any responses from the employee that came as a surprise to you or that caught you off guard? How did you react?
5. Was there any conflict between you and your employee? How was this resolved?
6. What aspect(s) of the appraisal interview went particularly well?
7. If you regularly performed performance appraisals, what two goals would you set for yourself to improve the next interview session?