

### General Introduction

This material focuses on the theoretical side of appraisals: what they are meant to achieve, why companies choose to use them, and why they do and don't work.

You might also want to include in your lessons some practical details of how an appraisal works in different companies, such as examples of the forms used by appraisers and employees being appraised, examples of the questions that are discussed, etc. This would be especially useful for pre-experience learners (for whom the reading text has been written).

Much of this information is readily accessible on the Internet. The template forms provided by Microsoft® (<http://office.microsoft.com/en-001/templates/employee-performance-evaluation-TC103973922.aspx>) might be a good starting point.

If your trainees work in a particular industry or field, it should be relatively easy to find more specific examples.

A. If you are working with job-experienced learners, give them lots of opportunities to refer to their own personal experience of being appraised, carrying out appraisals, or both.

### Worksheet A

#### A. Pre-reading

Encourage students to complete this global comprehension activity as quickly as they can. The best technique is to first find parts of the text that support the two correct statements. For example:

3. 'A lot can go wrong with them'; 'should be treated circumspectly'; 'only if they are managed astutely'.
5. 'Each element in a PA system requires advanced skills of the line manager'

They can then eliminate the incorrect statements. For example:

2. 'From the employee's perspective, there is also potentially something to gain from a PA system.'
4. 'which at least the more assertive type of individual finds useful' (the use of 'at least' implies that non-assertive individuals might also benefit).

#### Key:

3 and 5

#### B. Comprehension

This activity focuses on some of the more difficult passages in the text and checks students' ability to cope with reading a complex academic writing style. Use the explanatory notes to show that the first step to understanding the underlying meaning is to identify pronouns and expressions which are not immediately clear and decide what they are actually referring to.

#### Key:

1. a. The pronoun 'them' refers to the 'goals and performance standard' and not 'the individual'.
2. b. The distinction being drawn here is between the broader concepts of performance and development, rather than the specific areas of 'training, coaching and task assignment', which are all simply aspects of 'employee development'.
3. a. Here, what 'these underlying variables' refers to is clear from the context and surrounding content.
4. b. Here, the meaning is clear from the context and surrounding content.
5. b. This depends on understanding that 'performance' refers to how (well) people do their job, and not to what they do.
6. a. Here, the meaning is clear from the context and surrounding content.

#### C. Vocabulary 1

Point out that all the words identified in the text are typically used in formal / academic style, whereas the ones in the question are in a less formal register.

For stronger students, get them to identify a few more examples, e.g. 'fundamental' (in text), instead of 'basic'; 'vast' (in text) instead of 'very big', etc.

#### Key:

1. *nexus*; 2. *impeded*; 3. *enhancing*; 4. *circumspectly*; 5. *astutely*; 6. *formidable*

#### D. Vocabulary 2

This is another quite challenging activity, but these distinctions are all important and relevant to the topic.

If you are working with a monolingual group, this might be an appropriate moment to invite them to translate and explain the difference between the words in their own language before they attempt to do this in English (or, instead of explaining it in English if you are working with weaker students).

**Key:**

1. A standard is a defined level of performance which employees are measured against. A goal is the level of performance which employees are expected to aim at (similar to an objective, or target).

2. Training usually involves teaching specific skills and normally takes place off-site or in dedicated classes – Coaching takes place in the office and (when carried out by a manager) often forms part of the normal working day. Training is more typically carried out in groups, whereas coaching is usually a one-to-one process, tailored to the individual's needs.

3. Motivation is the positive reason we have for wanting to do something, especially something difficult or challenging. Trust is the belief that colleagues will do what you expect them to, and that what they tell you is true.

4. When we design a system, we plan how it is going to work. When we implement it, we actually use it and apply it to work situations.

5. Managerial work is any work that involves supervising or managing other people. Professional work is typically a job that involves an extended period of training before you can do the job properly.

**E. Discussion**

Choose which of the topics you want to cover depending on the time available. These could all be set as essay questions or class presentation assignments.

**Worksheet B**

**A. Pre-listening**

Get students to compare their ideas in pairs, small groups, or the whole class.

**B. Comprehension**

Get students to answer this global comprehension question as quickly as they can.

With stronger students, you could get them to try to

identify the themes themselves, rather than giving them the list from the outset.

**Key:**

3 – 5 – 2 – 1 – 4

**C. Vocabulary**

When they have completed this activity, encourage students to note down these expressions, all of which are useful for the discussion of the general topic of Performance Appraisal.

**Key:**

1. d; 2. f; 3. a; 4. c; 5. g; 6. b; 7. h; 8. e

**D. Project**

Encourage students to do research on the Internet. In particular, get them to find specific examples of PA questions and procedures.

**A** Pre-reading

Read the text. Which two of the following statements best represent the author's overall opinion of performance appraisal?

1. Performance appraisal systems are generally too complicated.
2. Performance appraisals are more useful for employers than employees.
3. Performance appraisals can be beneficial, but need to be treated with caution.
4. Only assertive employees really benefit from performance appraisals.
5. A performance appraisal is really only as good as the manager conducting it.

## What is Performance Appraisal?

Performance planning and appraisal systems (typically shortened to 'performance appraisal' or 'PA') systems are formal methods of planning and evaluating employee performance that involve interviewing (typically annually) to discuss work goals or behavioural standards and the individual's achievements in terms of them. In goal-based systems, new goals can then be agreed for the next year or period. But PA systems are not just about performance planning and feedback. They frequently require the line manager to make a recommendation about pay (for example a merit-pay increase within the salary range) and may provide input into decisions about promotion to a higher position. They also very often include some form of planning for employee development, including training, coaching and task-assignment actions, although some organizations separate these activities in case the 'developmental' discussion is impeded by the 'evaluative' discussion going on around the individual's performance.

PA systems, then, are among the most complex kinds of HR practice. They are not actually a single HR practice, but a nexus of various HR practices. Surveys of HR practices that treat PA as a single practice are, thus, making a fundamental error. The complexity of HR systems means that their design and quality of implementation varies enormously. A lot can go wrong with them, which can undermine employee motivation and trust rather than enhancing these underlying variables. The notion that 'performance appraisal improves performance' because the

'performance' word is embedded in it should be treated circumspectly, as with any HR technique containing the word 'performance'. Each element in a PA system requires advanced skills of the line manager and carries risks. Reviews of research on PA systems stress that they can play a productive role, but only if they are managed astutely.

Despite the formidable challenges, executives have long been able to see a valid and important role for formal performance appraisal, particularly in large organizations with major numbers of salaried staff. Research in Britain shows that PA systems are growing as a way of managing individual performance, particularly in managerial and professional work. As noted above, the spread of performances in work with higher levels of discretion is vast and it seems only logical to manage each 'human asset' in an individualized manner. From the employee's perspective, there is also potentially something to gain from a PA system. PA systems can form the basis for discussing the individual's job and their career development in a way that only otherwise occurs at their recruitment interview. This means that employees are often keen to have an annual review: it is frequently their best chance to talk back. PA systems provide a one-to-one forum for employee voice which at least the more assertive type of individual finds useful.

Adapted from: *Management, Work & Organizations* (Boxall & Purcell), pp. 215-217; ©Peter Boxall and John Purcell, 2011

Worksheet A: Level 2 (Upper Intermediate)

**B** Comprehension

Look at the extracts from the text and decide if a or b is the best paraphrase.

1. ... to discuss work goals or behavioural standards and the individual's achievements in terms of them. [paragraph 1, lines 5-7]
  - a. To discuss whether the individual has met the goals and standards previously set.
  - b. To invite the individual to describe and define their achievements in their own words.
  
2. They also very often include some form of planning for employee development, including training, coaching and task-assignment actions, although some organizations separate these activities in case the 'developmental' discussion is impeded by the 'evaluative' discussion going on around the individual's performance. [paragraph 1, lines 15-21]
  - a. Some organizations prefer to treat training, coaching and task assignment as separate activities, as grouping them together can cause confusion.
  - b. Some organizations prefer to discuss individual performance and employee development in separate meetings, as grouping them together can cause confusion.
  
3. A lot can go wrong with them, which can undermine employee motivation and trust rather than enhancing these underlying variables. [paragraph 2, lines 28-31]

The expression these underlying variables refers to:

  - a. the employees' motivation and trust.
  - b. the employees themselves.
  
4. The notion that 'performance appraisal improves performance' because the 'performance' word is embedded in it should be treated circumspectly, as with any HR technique containing the word 'performance'. [paragraph 2, lines 31-35]
  - a. The meaning of the word 'performance' when used to describe HR techniques is not always clear.
  - b. The use of the word 'performance' in the name of an HR technique does not guarantee that the technique will actually improve people's performance.
  
5. ... the spread of performances in work with higher levels of discretion is vast. [paragraph 3, lines 8-10]
  - a. People who do jobs involving confidential information usually carry out a wide range of different tasks.
  - b. People who do jobs that give them the freedom to make their own decisions generally vary a great deal in how well they do their job.
  
6. PA systems provide a one-to-one forum for employee voice which at least the more assertive type of individual finds useful. [paragraph 3, lines 18-21]
  - a. Performance appraisal works best for more confident employees, as it involves speaking to your manager face to face.
  - b. The more self-confident employees can use performance appraisal to voice other employees' concerns to their managers.

Worksheet A: Level 2 (Upper Intermediate)

**C Vocabulary 1**

Find words in the text with a similar meaning.

1. a complicated series of connections
2. blocked
3. improving / making better
4. cautiously
5. wisely
6. difficult and daunting

**D Vocabulary 2**

Explain the difference between these pairs of words, as they are used in the text. Use a dictionary to help you.

1. *a standard* and *a goal*
2. *training* and *coaching*
3. *motivation* and *trust*
4. *design* and *implement* (a system)
5. *managerial* and *professional* (work)

**E Discussion**

Discuss the following questions.

1. Do you think pay and performance should be discussed separately in a performance appraisal? Why / Why not?
2. Again, consider the statement 'some organizations separate discussion of individual performance and career development, as it can be difficult to discuss both at the same time'. Why do you think it might be difficult to discuss both individual performance and career development at the same time? Do you agree that the two should be kept separate?
3. Do you think there are some jobs for which PA is more useful than others. Are there any jobs where PA would not work?
4. 'PA systems provide a one-to-one forum for employees to speak. The employees – especially the more assertive ones – find this very useful.' Do you think this is always the case? If not, why not?

Worksheet B: Level 2 (Upper Intermediate)

**A Pre-listening**

When performance appraisals do not work successfully, what do you think are the main reasons? What can prevent them from achieving their intended objectives? Discuss and make notes.

You are going to hear a conversation between Laura, a new employee, and Tom, who has been working at the same company for a long time. Listen and compare your ideas with the ones mentioned in the conversation.

**B Comprehension**

Listen to the conversation and put these general themes in the order they appear.

1. Reasons for managers being too 'soft'.
2. Reasons for managers being too negative.
3. The huge number of things a single performance appraisal meeting is meant to achieve.
4. The consequences for a company of managers not being critical enough.
5. The limitations of preparatory training for performance appraisals.

Now listen once more and make more detailed notes for each theme. Then check your answers with a partner.

**C Vocabulary**

Here is some of the vocabulary of performance appraisals (all these expressions are used in the conversation). Match the verbs (1-8) with the complements (a-h).

- |                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| 1. to set               | a. ways of improving performance          |
| 2. to comment           | b. people to improve their performance    |
| 3. to suggest           | c. a lot to do with someone's personality |
| 4. to have              | d. performance standards or objectives    |
| 5. to enjoy or to avoid | e. trained / training to do something     |
| 6. to help              | f. on an employee's performance           |
| 7. to address           | g. criticising other people               |
| 8. to get               | h. performance issues and problems        |

Can you think of any more vocabulary specifically related to performance appraisals? Make a list.

**D Project**

Tom has put forward some of the key arguments against performance appraisals, but there are also a lot of positive reasons for doing them.

Either (a) write an essay or (b) prepare and give a class presentation on 'The pros and cons of performance appraisals'.

Listening transcript: Level 2 (Upper Intermediate)

Laura, a new employee of a company, is talking to Tom, who has been working at the same company for a long time. They are talking about performance appraisals.

- Laura:** Tom, next week it's my first performance appraisal since I joined the company. You've been working here a long time, so you must have been appraised lots of times.
- Tom:** I certainly have! Can't you see all these grey hairs on my head?
- Laura:** I never noticed them! So, what can I expect?
- Tom:** Well, I think you might be asking the wrong person.
- Laura:** Why's that?
- Tom:** Well, in my experience, performance appraisals are usually a complete waste of time.
- Laura:** That's a bit negative, isn't it? I did the training course about how to prepare for appraisals last month, and it seemed like a useful process to me. Why do you have such a bad opinion of them?
- Tom:** Well, for one thing, so much depends on how good the manager is. Think about what managers are supposed to do during appraisals. They need to set goals and performance standards. They are meant to comment on your performance during the past year in a way that is accurate, constructive and fair. And they are required to suggest ways you can both improve your performance and develop your career.
- Laura:** Yes, that's a lot.
- Tom:** And that's not all. While doing all this, the managers are expected to make sure you're performing well for the company. But at the same time they have to ensure that you feel the company values the contribution you're making; in other words, the appraisal should help you to stay motivated as an employee. That's a great deal to achieve successfully in just one interview.
- Laura:** But just like I got trained to prepare for my appraisal, surely the managers are trained to carry out appraisals, aren't they? Won't that training help them?
- Tom:** Well, yes. Of course they are trained to carry out appraisals, just as you've been trained to be appraised. But, unless you're very lucky, all the things they teach you on these training courses – well, they don't happen in real life. It's a bit like when you learn to drive. When you take your driving test, you do everything perfectly. But when people start driving on their own, they start to develop bad habits.
- Laura:** What do you mean?
- Tom:** What I'm saying is that it isn't just a question of how well-prepared or knowledgeable your manager is. It also has a lot to do with the manager's personality. I've had lots of different managers since I started here, so I've seen all sorts of problems.
- Laura:** What sort of problems?
- Tom:** Well, some managers are too critical. They just enjoy criticizing the people working for them, whether it's fair or not. And the problem is even worse when the feedback the manager gives is unconstructive. Criticism should help people to improve. There's no point criticizing things that the employee can't change or control.
- Laura:** Yes, I can see that.
- Tom:** And the worst situation of all is when a manager is criticizing someone for personal reasons, rather than because they are really performing badly.

Listening transcript: Level 2 (Upper Intermediate)

- Laura:** But why would a manager want to do that?
- Tom:** Oh that's simple. They might not like the person they are appraising. Or, they could be jealous of the person because they are too successful. Or they may even see the person as a threat or a rival – somebody who might take their job.
- Laura:** That's really bad. So do you think the main problem with appraisals is the managers who criticize too much, or criticize unfairly?
- Tom:** Well, no actually. In my experience, the opposite problem is more common. A lot of managers are much too soft in appraisals.
- Laura:** But why would a manager not want to criticize a person in an appraisal if there's a real problem that needs to be addressed?
- Tom:** There are all sorts of reasons. Some managers think criticizing a person will reflect badly on them when it's their turn to be appraised by their boss. Some realise that they have to continue working with the person after the appraisal has been completed, so they prefer to avoid conflict because they don't want to risk spoiling their relationship with the employee. And some managers are simply lazy – they just don't want to do the additional work needed to deal with a problem.
- Laura:** That's terrible.
- Tom:** Yes, and it's terrible for the company, too. When performance issues aren't dealt with during the appraisal, then people who are performing badly often get promoted to a job that they are not capable of doing.
- Laura:** Yes, I see.
- Tom:** And because the poorly performing manager has been promoted, this means they get a higher salary, so they are less likely to want to leave the company. So the whole problem is passed on to the next manager to deal with.
- Laura:** Well, I can see some of the problems now you've explained them. But surely there's a positive case for having performance appraisals ...