

Knowledge Worker

Reframing Performance Appraisals

(December 2016)

I was recently contacted by a Learning and Development specialist in Boston city government who had been asked to provide a one-hour training session to managers on writing performance appraisals. He wanted to know what I would do in his shoes. There ensued an exchange that sheds some light on reframing performance appraisal, particularly the roles of the manager and those being appraised by that manager. Here is my response to his inquiry:

“What I would do in your shoes is recommend that they do what I did for many years – in the Navy and in the private sector: I had the people reporting to me write their own performance reviews, including any numerical rating. I would then review the appraisals they had written and make notes to myself regarding areas where I thought they were being overly harsh on themselves and where they had left out some obvious good things to say about their performance. I would then edit the performance reviews to reflect my changes as well as my spelling and grammatical preferences. This edited version is what the person and I would review at the performance review sessions.

“What I did cut way down on the amount of writing I had to do and provided ample opportunity for the employees to have abundant input to their performance appraisal, including the number. I don’t recall ever having to lower a rating and I don’t recall ever having to add negative comments. The employees were a bit surprised the first time they encountered this reversal of roles but took to it very quickly. They were invariably much harder on themselves than I would have been and I had some wonderful conversations with them about why they were being so hard on themselves and why they so often overlooked their positive contributions. In short, I got to be the good guy. My writing workload was cut way down and the performance review sessions were invariably pleasant and profitable instead of being trying and tortuous.”

“The shift here is one of making the manager the audience for the appraisal and the employee the author. In fact, I would title the one-hour session, *“From Author to Audience.”* In it I would describe this shift on the part of managers from authoring performance appraisals to being the audience for them. I would also describe and discuss the process for using it as well as any concerns they might have related to how their direct reports might respond and what, if anything, HR might say. I used this approach for many years and never once ran afoul of HR because the final version of the appraisal met HR’s requirements and carried both signatures. The employees were happy to sign it, so was I, and so was HR.”

Here is his response to me:

“Hi, Fred, thank you for taking the time to respond. I really appreciate you sharing your process for how you conducted performance appraisals. The ‘From Author to Audience’ perspective is a brilliant re-frame of the traditional way managers normally engage with direct reports. This perspective is a great way to pivot within the normal forms of performance management – which I

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imagine creates a different kind of exchange within the review process – more inclusive, empowering, dynamic and relevant to all parties. Thank you, Fred!”

It is worth emphasizing that this “reframing” of the performance appraisal writing process significantly reduces the writing workload on managers while retaining their responsibility for and ability to shape the finished document. At the same time, it also affords the employee being appraised ample opportunity to shape that same document and does not add significantly to the employee’s workload; after all, the employee must write only one appraisal. And that is all that managers should have to write; namely, their own.

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, a writer, consultant and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the managing partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning *Knowledge Workers’ Tool Room* and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*.