

Developing the Team

A Model for a Team Appraisal System

Discussion Document
By Mark Crowther, Empirical Pragmatic Tester

Introduction

In theory, the perfect set of objectives define exactly what the employee is to achieve over the coming year. At the end of the year, in the annual performance review, the manager simply measures whether—or to what extent—the objectives were achieved.

In reality the manager gets to the end of the year, pulls out the annual appraisal forms and realises the long forgotten objectives are grossly out of date. What's more there are no records to support a decision as to whether objectives have really been met or if performance was to acceptable standards or not. The manager has a feeling some were and some weren't.

Without clear evidence to support a decision the manager has no choice but to appraise the employee's performance as acceptable. Any argument to the contrary will be easily dismissed by the employee. The manager will be left with the difficult choice to stick with their view with no real basis except gut feeling or back down and reappraise the performance as acceptable. Either way the employee is being unfairly and ineffectually managed.

Then the other side will be the manager's manager requesting the assessment to be rewritten to match their own beliefs about the employees performance. This is a great way to undermine a manager and if these requests are based on subjectivity it's well within reason for the manager to ask for evidence of the need to rewrite. Remember, it will be you who explains the assessment to the employee not your manager, the APA is your opinion not the second hand opinion of others!

The outcome of the annual appraisal should be an almost forgone conclusion with clear evidence to support the appraisal outcome. Employees should have no surprises presented to them and should readily accept the appraisal based on activities through the year.

The Performance Appraisal Process

The only way to ensure the end of year appraisal is valid and useful, is continued appraisal throughout the year. Annual appraisal with no ongoing activities, measures and reassessments in the year is a near useless exercise and certainly one that will not motivate the employee or drive them, the team or department forward.

The expanded process has three steps:

- 1 to 1's
- 3 Month Plans
- Annual APA

Through this the employee is supported and developed in the short, medium and long term. There is a series of activities that can hold long term goals in place and allow the pathways to achieving them to be adjusted, adapted and appraised, through setting goals and objectives of a shorter life span.

The most effective way to set this process off is to start from the top down.

Annual Performance Appraisal (APA)

The APA programme simply requires a set of objectives to be recorded and agreed. In doing so the foundation for the rest of the process is set. It's from these high level and long term objectives that the other goals are broken out and defined.

Setting the objectives

It's too easy to set objectives that are wishful thinking and unlikely to be achieved. It's also too easy to pluck objectives out of thin air and hope they somehow tie in with global objectives of the business or department. Here's some helpful ideas on setting good objectives:

- Identify how the test team provides valuable services to the organisation. What roles does each employee play in providing those services?
- Use the SMART mnemonic to remind you to create objectives that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-boxed.
- Consider what incentives you're giving employees in each objective. Will the objective point the employee in the direction of serving the customer better?
- Ask yourself what signals you're giving with each objective. Are you directing employees toward what's most important?
- Specify the objective, but leave the means of achieving it to the individual. You don't want to be a micromanager, do you?

Limit yourself to setting around four objectives. During the year you will have four 3-month plans to use in support of these and that's about the right length of time to work on a long-term goal. Be stretching but be realistic. Setting too few means reduced chances of delivering something valuable if they are blocked. Setting too many means overstretching and risking achieving little of value.

Review the Objectives

Once you have drafted a set of annual objectives on the APA form, get it reviewed. Use your fellow managers or your manager or their manager. Have someone look over the goals for you and get guidance on whether they make sense, are SMART, etc. doing this before you present them to the employee could save a lot of back peddling and rewriting later on. Undermining the confidence of the employee with badly thought out objectives will not be a good start.

If departmental objectives are in place it would be good to support mutually shared objectives across the teams in support of the department.

Getting the employees agreement

When you first present the objectives to the employee they are going to be concerned. Concerned about the goals themselves, about whether they can achieve them and about the support they will receive in doing so throughout the year. Take each objective in turn and talk the employee through them. Explain why it's been set, what the value is to the team and the employee and outline ways the employee might go about achieving them.

Once these things are understood the employee must agree to them. The only outcome will be failure if the manager forces objectives on an employee that is openly declaring they can't achieve them. This isn't to say the employee can pick and choose, simply that they might not be as SMART as you thought once discussed with the employee.

If the employee is insistent they can't achieve the goal and you feel they have a valid argument and no alternative objective is forthcoming, don't be afraid to end the meeting. This is no failing on either part, it's going to happen from time to time and is the opportunity to review again and come back with more achievable goals.

Clarify Roles and responsibility

As a Manager the responsibility is to define the objective, but not the means of achieving it. Professional responsibility lies with the employee who agreed to the objective when they reviewed then agreed to them at presentation meeting.

That isn't to say that the manager should leave the employee to mystically find the solutions to achieving the objectives however, coaching and guiding the employee along the right path is expected of the manager, micro managing is not.

Make sure the employee understands this at the presentation meeting.

Keep records

Every meeting held that involves review of the objectives, redefines the objectives, confirms activities in support of them, etc. must be recorded. Either you or the employee should confirm what was discussed by email then updates made to records and the emails filed. These records are the evidence in support of your final appraisal. Without them your opinion is purely subjective.

There's no need to keep this record keeping secret, let the employee know you're doing it and encourage them to do the same. Remember, no surprises later on.

Next steps

If this is the conclusion of you APA presentation thank the employee for their time, reassure them of how you're looking forward to seeing them achieve the objectives and supporting where needed, then close the meeting.

Get the documents written up, send the email confirming what was discussed and agreed and allow the employee time to reflect on the commencement of the years programme.

Annual Review

Unless meetings during the year show APA objectives need changing, the next time you meet formally about what was agreed here could be in a year's time. Should APA objectives need updating and realigning address this directly, don't leave it until the annual appraisal.

3 Month Plan (3MP)

The 3MP are effectively a medium term APA, however this is to be much more flexible. Therefore when setting the activities be ready to readjust these activities at your review meetings.

Work with the employee to set these activities don't just set them for them. We've got our APA goals in place so let them exercise their professional creativity while you support and mentor them in defining ways to achieve them.

Setting the activities

Get around three activities agreed. As a rule of thumb be thinking:

- One objective to directly develop the employee
- One to develop and support the team itself
- One focused on achieving the APA objectives

Allocating time to succeed

Remember you are allocating roughly one month per activity, don't try to get the employee to do too much. They still need to be working during these periods and it's better they complete activities early than run out of time or experience stress as they feel the pull between objectives and work.

Allocate them specific periods to be working on these activities. The employee can't just make these things happen, you have to give them time to do so.

Key points

Follow the same path as for APAs:

- Review the activities
- Get employee agreement
- Define roles and responsibilities
- Keep records

Monthly Review

You might consider adding a monthly review meeting for these activities depending on how critical they are to keep on track. They are intended to last around a month and as they're more fluid than APA objectives more frequent review might be needed. A monthly meeting to formally review the progress of the quarterly plan will ensure the activities remain on track and provide an opportunity to realign the activities if required.

Your 1 to 1 meetings will frequently touch on these activities but don't rely on them to address issues that have arisen as the 1 to 1 has a different focus.

1 to 1

Unlike the APA and 3MP meetings the agenda must be kept fully open and it's valid not to consider the 1 to 1 as part of a the formal APA programme.

The 1 to 1 meetings allow the employee an open forum where they are free to raise any and all issues that are of concern to them, these could include:

- their work is and any occurrences they want to share with you
- matters around professional relationships
- raise your awareness of particular matters
- share thoughts on events of the last week or the coming week

and a multitude of others.

The most important thing is for the manager not to take the meeting over. All week and then again in your other meetings you have the opportunity to do so. In the 1 to 1 you listen, probe, question, coach and support. At two-thirds of the meeting belongs to the employee.

This may be the employee's only real opportunity to get uninterrupted focused time with you and so you must let them use the time as they need. Don't expect every employee to be articulate and forthcoming with issues or plans of addressing them. You still have to be active in driving the 1 to 1 forward, creating agreement about items of discussion and helping to define any actions that come out of it.

The remaining half of the meeting is where you raise any points you wish addressing, provide guidance to the employee and set any short term activities, finally where you review last weeks 1 to 1.

As always, make notes or have them provide you brief bullet point notes after the meeting so there is a record of what was agreed

References and bibliography:

- Stop destroying my team with bad MBOs: Rex Black, Stickyminds Original
- Superteams: Hastings, Bixby, Chaudhry-Lawton
- How to make successful decisions: Alison Hardingham