Person-Centered Appraisals for Encouraging Growth and Development

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The libraries of today are not just buildings that house books. Rather they are institutions where library staff champion efforts and initiatives to provide access to resources, support communities, promote literacy, and protect the public's right to freedom of information (American Library Association, n.d.). As the director of the Los Angeles County Library System Skye Patrick aptly noted, "Libraries are not about books, they're about people" (Howard, 2019, para. 31). Library staff build and sustain sound, interpersonal relationships with the public and the communities they serve.

Library employees should therefore possess the appropriate social and interpersonal skills to serve their respective communities. Work practices should help library employees build and hone their interpersonal skills. A performance appraisal, although evaluative in nature, represents a model of communication that can provide opportunities to inspire employees and build upon their existing skills. However, the value and effectiveness of performance appraisals have been questioned and their use characterized as bureaucratic (Rademan & Vos, 2001). To emphasize the importance of interpersonal skills and relationship building, managers can implement a person-centered management approach in conducting performance appraisals. Doing so can help offset

the formulaic, impersonal nature of mandated appraisals that utilize scoring scales.

Because libraries are primarily service-oriented organizations, it makes sense from our perspective to utilize a person-centered management style when performing employee appraisals. Putting the needs of others first is a hallmark of any service profession (Munde, 2012). This coalesces well with the tenets of being person-centered—congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy—because the focus is on the needs of employees and not managers. In an environment that relies upon a standardized rating system, providing feedback in a mindful, humanistic manner helps to overcome the limitations imposed by existing methods. Being person-centered provides the opportunity to focus on an individual's contributions to the wellness of an organization while delivering negative comments regarding performance. Feedback is especially important when performance appraisals are mandated and managers lack incentives to recognize outstanding work by employees. As noted by Plas and Lewis (2001), supporting employee development is a key component of successful organizations.

Although practicing person-centered management techniques may be second nature to some librarians, there appears to be a gap in terms of management and leadership knowledge within the profession. Schreiner and Pope (2011) found that more than 63 percent of survey respondents wished they had taken more management classes while in library school. Although more than half of the sixty-six library and information schools accredited by the American Library Association (ALA, 2006) identify Management and Administration as a concentration, the content may focus more on theoretical rather than practical aspects. Singh and Vorbach (2017) examined the programs and course descriptions of ALA-accredited programs and found that most are "still falling short when it comes to offering advanced management courses on a regular basis" (p. 103). While support exists for continuing education programs focused on issues related to library management (Matteson et al., 2015), the concept of person-centered management in relation to libraries has not been fully explored. Plas and Lewis (2001) identified that person-centered management emphasizes individual employee development, which aligns well with libraries because oftentimes

leadership skills are learned on the job and developed through experience (Wong, 2017).

Librarians are often thrust into assuming management positions without sufficient knowledge related to personnel issues (Rooney, 2010). This can be problematic for both the manager and the employee. Examples of inexperience with performance appraisals include focusing on completing the appraisal to meet a deadline without providing meaningful feedback or providing only negative or developmental feedback. Poorly executed performance appraisals may have impacts on an employee's ability to apply for promotions and, in some organizations, limit merit increases. They may also hinder an employee's motivation and desire to grow professionally.

BACKGROUND AND SERVICE ORIENTATION

A brief description of the appraisal process will clarify how a person-centered management approach may be integrated at institutions with different organizational structures. At William Paterson University, we use the ePAR (electronic Performance Assessment Review) as prescribed by the State of New Jersey's Civil Service Commission. This assessment tool is used by managers to formally communicate with career services employees regarding their performance, development plan, and relevant organization-wide goals (State of New Jersey Civil Service Commission, n.d.). As a part of a public organization, the appraisal process is not related to extrinsic rewards such as promotions or pay increases but may affect intrinsic factors such as motivation and professional development.

Appraisal cycles are annual, and designated raters (usually direct supervisors/managers) are required by the state to meet with employees. The ePAR has a three-tier rating scale of exceptional, successful, and unsatisfactory. The cycle begins with a review of job expectations, an interim review, and a final review. Employees may submit written feedback. The HR department offers guidance on performance matters, preparing a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), and must be consulted for any final unsatisfactory ratings. Although continuous follow-up is sensible for employees with PIPs, this practice suggests that mentorship is reserved only for these instances and unnecessary for those lacking

performance challenges. Using a person-centered approach would mean making equal mentorship opportunities available for all employees, regardless of performance challenges.

During an appraisal, the conditions of unconditional positive regard and empathy may be applied in a more personable interaction, as managers seek to understand and mentor employees. Meeting in person to have thoughtful conversations about an employee's performance, goals, and challenges brings a caring predisposition to an otherwise bureaucratic process. Increasing purposeful interactions with and guidance for employees rather than limiting communications to conversations at review time shows that raters can be thoughtful and mindful of those elements which may help employees perform better at their jobs. Kacmar et al. (2003) found that employees who communicated more frequently with their supervisors reported more favorable job performance ratings. Communicating more frequently, not only during performance appraisal time, helps keep the process transparent and creates a good flow of feedback for both parties.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POSITIVE EVALUATIONS

Plas and Lewis (2001) define person-centered leadership as a type of participatory management that pays as much attention to employee development as company development. As noted earlier the ePAR is managed electronically, but supervisors and employees are required to meet in person to discuss the review. These meetings allow the supervisor and employee to reflect on the employee's performance over the past year and explore possibilities for the new cycle. Meeting face-to-face allows the manager to apply a person-centered approach to the meeting, during which personal accountability and job responsibilities can be explored. Employees may need to discuss other sensitive issues with the manager. They may be frustrated with their workflow and may not understand how to communicate this. In-person meetings allow the manager and employee to connect and engage in open dialogue. Meeting in person removes potential barriers to communication. For new employees, this is an opportunity to explore all aspects of their job responsibilities and reflect on their strengths and areas of improvement. Ideally, all employees grow, learn, and adapt within their positions.

Each employee brings a unique perspective to their role within the organization. A person-centered approach can help with evaluating how well they have adapted to their job and explore ways to allow the employee to use their unique abilities to help the organization grow and thrive. For example, an employee with a flair for marketing library programs or artistic talent should be encouraged to express these gifts. Encouraging employees to explore their passions could eventually lead to changes in their roles. Long-tenured employees may need to find new challenges, and their creativity should not be stifled simply because something was not part of their original job descriptions. Growth and learning can help an organization thrive and prosper. Library managers may benefit from reading Giesecke's (2001) book *Practical Strategies for Library Managers,* which can help library managers develop and ask pertinent questions, such as the following:

- Does the employee believe they have everything they need to do their job properly?
- Do they think additional training could help them perform their work better?
- Do they feel overwhelmed by their workload?

This process mutually benefits the employee and the organization (Giesecke, 2001).

Communication is the lifeblood of a successful department. Supervisors can establish professional relationships that will often-times lead to meaningful communication and enhance the well-being of the employees, who perceive themselves as being valued. Managers can also reflect on their own management style with employees to evaluate what works best for each one. Employees can benefit from supervisors adjusting their management styles, and such adjustments can help build trust within the department. Supervisors should ask employees to reflect upon highlights or challenges they have experienced for discussion. This task can help employees identify areas for improvement in a nonjudgmental way. Supervisors and employees can together examine ways to help the employees feel more confident and effective. Training opportunities can be explored to help the employees advance.

Frequent communication between supervisors and employees outside of the appraisal cycle establishes a feedback loop to check on projects and deadlines. This helps encourage employees to perform their best work regardless of how long they have been in their positions, including long-time employees who may expect they will receive the highest scores regardless of performance levels. In a union environment, it is challenging to fire someone. Termination must be for cause, and the contract specifies that in the absence of documented performance issues, it comes down to seniority. Regular communication can help supervisors document both successes and failures, both of which are important to track over time.

Supervisors will find it helpful to keep track of accomplishments achieved by employees during the appraisal cycle. This helps create positive evaluation experiences and reduces anxiety for the employees. When there is no monetary compensation or promotion available to motivate employees, formally noting accomplishments encourages employees to perform their best.

Supervisors must recognize and value their employees' work. This acknowledgment is at the heart of person-centered management. If an employee is falling short but making progress, this should be acknowledged to help the employee keep up the momentum. The final evaluation should reflect the progression of the employee throughout the review cycle.

Person-centered appraisals offer positive, reciprocal, and productive opportunities for managers and employees to discover and build upon their strengths. Regardless of whether the appraisals are positive or negative, clear communication on the part of supervisors is paramount. By choosing a person-centered method, managers can help curb negative perceptions regarding the usefulness and viability of this evaluation tool (Bowman, 1999).

WHEN EXPECTATIONS ARE NOT MET

The following case study demonstrates how to model compassion through this process.

The library purchased updated software for processing that would be implemented in stages. The employees whose job responsibilities included processing were first trained on what was considered the easier procedure of the new system. The employees adjusted to the new workflows, but one struggled to learn the sequence. Though the processing steps were similar to those in the old system, the new interface still presented a challenge. Additional training was offered to the employee, who learned but continued to struggle. The employee has had numerous past errors in their workflows. Because job responsibilities and expectations are reviewed annually, change was needed to assist the employee who was struggling with the new system. They were provided detailed steps of work processes, options for supervision of the work process, and additional help when there was more work than could be completed during their shift.

Applying elements of person-centered management and recognizing the need to practice empathy, the supervisor temporarily reassigned student assistant hiring, training, and supervision to allow the employee to focus on the most problematic work. The employee was hesitant at first to relinquish these valued responsibilities. The supervisor made clear that the move was temporary and would allow for focused training on the new system. After completing and documenting procedures for project phase two, the struggling employee expressed gratitude for the time to focus on the migration and mastery of the new system.

Communicating a rationale as well as a clear plan provided for a good outcome. The flexibility to accept a reprieve from being overwhelmed at the busiest point of the semester while training was well received. The manager employed a reciprocal communication practice to engage employee trust.

In worst-case scenarios, appraisals can help employees understand the expectations of their roles within the organizational unit. For example, a staff member may continue to have high error rates even

though they have received additional support. Ongoing performance appraisal can help identify the impacts of their work being insufficiently completed.

Eventually an employee may realize that the job responsibilities conflict with their long-term goals. Modeling Brené Brown's (2018) chapter "Clear Is Kind," the manager guided the employee through close progress reports and useful feedback. The danger of half-truths and avoidance of difficult conversations would have been unkind to the employee and a disservice to the organization. Difficult conversations allow for the manager and employee to identify which aspects of the job the employee is either unable or unwilling to adapt in order to successfully perform. When this occurs, the manager can suggest continued opportunities for training. The employee may recognize that they are unable to keep up with changing workplace demands and may choose to leave the position after repeated conversations regarding process or project failures.

In other cases, an employee may have outgrown the job and be ready for a new challenge. The appraisal process is helpful for the manager and the employee to observe that growth in their current position is not possible and that it may be time for a new role (Bowman, 1999). When opportunities open within or outside the organization, employees should feel comfortable approaching managers as references. A mentored person choosing to pursue another opportunity should not be frowned upon.

CONCLUSION

It is beneficial to the health of the organization for those in leadership roles to demonstrate the interpersonal qualities associated with person-centered management to help foster a positive and constructive atmosphere with employees. Being empathetic and open during performance appraisals helps perpetuate more communicative work relationships that are the foundations of productive and successful organizations.

Performance appraisals approached with a person-centered management style may be a mutual, reflective experience for an employee and

a manager. As presented by Carl Rogers and as cited by Cook et al. (2024), the framework elements of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy provide a fundamental foundation for a practical approach. Person-centered management encourages managers to be authentic, curious, and open during appraisals to help foster a relationship of continuous growth and development. These guiding elements are characteristic of a psychologically safe environment that allows for overcoming barriers to effective communication. The appraisal becomes reciprocal and an opportunity for a manager and an employee to learn from each other and reflect on each of their roles. Librarians are good at caring for patron needs, but not always adept at caring for the needs of employees. Applying a person-centered management approach to appraisals helps ensure managers bring a mindful and sensitive touch to a work-related process that fosters growth in professional work relationships. In this way, performance appraisals can become less evaluative and more mindful and developmental.

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