

Organizational Consultation XXVI: Feedback (Part Three)

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I have provided summary statements in the following chart regarding ways in which both deficit and appreciative approaches contribute to or distract from each of the twelve functions served by feedback systems in contemporary organizations. Using this summary analysis as a foundation, I will describe appreciative feedback processes in this essay that fulfill many if not all the twelve functions I identified in a previous essay and will link appreciative feedback strategies to the overarching goal of fully releasing the human capital that is to be found in every organization.

Chart
The Functions of Feedback and Appreciation

The Feedback Function	Deficit-Model	Appreciative Model
1. Personnel Decisions	YES	YES
2. Development/Training	YES (IF . . .)	YES
3. Intentional-Based Assessment	PARTIALLY ("COLD"/"WARM")	YES (WHERE IS THE THIMBLE LOCATED)
4. Team-Building	NO	YES
5. Staffing Needs	PARTIALLY (LOOK OUTSIDE)	YES (LOOK INSIDE FOR HUMAN RESOURCE)
6. Monitoring Compliance	PARTIALLY (NO CONTEXT)	YES (ESTABLISHES LEARNING MILIEU)
7. Equity	YES (BUT MORALE PROBLEM) (FEAR OF GIVING FEEDBACK TO SUPERIORS)	YES
8. Documenting Benefits	DEFINITELY NOT	DEFINITELY
9. R and D (Effectiveness)	DEFINITELY NOT	DEFINITELY
10. Perceptions (360-Degree)	PARTIALLY (DESTRUCTIVE UNLESS LINKED TO COACHING)	YES (ESPECIALLY IF LINKED TO COACHING)

11. Role Clarification	NO ("COLDER")	YES ("WARMER")
12. Modeling	PARTIALLY (ONLY MODELING DEFENSIVE BRAVERY: "SEE I CAN TAKE IT!")	YES (MODELING APPRECIATIVE LEADERSHIP)

A Deficit-Based Approach to Performance Appraisal

Typically, a deficit-based appraisal system is valued primarily because this appraisal can be used, when needed, to document and justify difficult personnel decisions. A mediocre or poor performance reviews might lead to a minimal increase in compensation, probationary status, or even termination of employment. Poor attendance, inconsistent performance, or a slipping sales record may have to be carefully documented, so that a manger can issue a formal warning to his subordinate. It’s all about delivering the bad news. Good news doesn’t get much attention.

Most deficit-based appraisals are ignored if this feedback is positive. Neither the person giving the feedback nor the person receiving the feedback is likely to focus on the good news. A perfunctory appraisal is usually completed that simply indicates that the subordinate is doing a good job, “meeting expectations” or even “exceeding expectations.” If we are primarily looking for mistakes and failure, then there is little need for a carefully documented statement regarding success or improvement. We simply indicate that the employee is getting “warmer,” and leave it at that.

The problems enumerated above with regard to performance appraisals are particularly challenging if the performance appraisal focuses on deficits in an employee’s performance, rather than focusing on the employee’s strengths and accomplishments. Professionals are likely to be adamant about their autonomy if the feedback they receive primarily concerns changes they must make in their performance. If we view ourselves as competent, self-sufficient professionals, or as knowledge workers with unique and often highly technical expertise, then we neither respect nor tolerate the intrusion of other people into our work life. They are trying to tell us what we are doing wrong, yet they do not fully comprehend either the work that we do or the context within which we are asked to fulfill our challenging responsibilities.

If a job is complex, or if responsibilities are frequently shifting, then a deficit-based appraisal will often be challenged by the person receiving the negative feedback. We can always justify poor performance if we can point to unclear, changing or contradictory expectations. If we have multiple bosses, than we can also appeal a negative appraisal by turning to another supervisor who has a different perspective on our work. If their

appraisal is also negative, then we can discount both appraisals by pointing to inconsistencies, differing emphases, or even the rather paranoid conclusion that “everyone is against me!”

Deficit-based appraisals inevitably generate defensiveness, even if the “bad news” isn’t really very bad. This defensiveness is exacerbated by the anxiety inherent in our complex, inconsistent and turbulent 21st Century environment. We are hurt, confused and frightened. We want to look elsewhere for excuses or reasons to discount the negative feedback we have received. If performance appraisals are being used primarily to justify and document difficult personnel decisions, then there is even greater reason to defend against a deficit-based appraisal. This process was never intended as a vehicle for employee development. It is only intended as a vehicle for intimidation and threat-based motivation. Why should I cooperate, given that it was not intended for my welfare!

If a performance appraisal system is going to focus on deficits, then it is critical that the feedback be specific and behavioral. Recipients of negative feedback should never be asked to modify their performance if the feedback is general, vague or non-substantiated. It is not enough to indicate that an employee “isn’t trying hard enough,” or that an employee “has a poor attitude about her work.” We must indicate what the behavior is that leads us to the conclusion that the employee is not working hard enough or has a poor attitude. Does the employee show up ten minutes late to work at least three days each week? Does the employee produce 20% fewer customer contacts than other employees doing similar work? It is not enough to indicate that a salesman “turns off his customers.” One must document this “turn off” with direct comments from customers or detailed notes regarding the salesman’s performance that have been prepared by neutral observers.

A deficit-based appraisal should also be tied directly to specific training or educational programs that can be of value to the employee in helping him improve his performance in the areas that have been identified as deficits. The employee should never be required to attend a training or education program as a result of a poor performance review. There is little for the employee to gain if the development program is mandatory. We know from numerous research studies that unmotivated or negatively motivated employees rarely learn anything.

The training or educational program should instead be identified as an *opportunity* for the employee. Preferably, several different programs would be available. This allows the employee to match the training or education program with his own learning style. By providing several choices, one is also helping the employee save face and regain some sense of control over this anxiety-laden situation. The principal goal of any performance appraisal should be the improvement of employee performance. Even a deficit-based appraisal will be more

influential in helping an employee with his improvement, if the person providing this appraisal is sensitive to and respectful of the employee's self-esteem.

An Appreciative Approach to Performance Appraisal

While the problems just enumerated are inherent in any performance appraisal system, they are much less likely to be prominent or insurmountable if this system is appreciative in nature. Professionals and knowledge workers can retain their autonomy, while also benefiting from the information provided by their colleagues regarding areas in which they are particularly effective. We are always open to surprise and new learning when someone points to an area in which we are competent that has not previously been in our sight.

The holders of complex and shifting jobs also can benefit from an appreciative approach to performance appraisal. People who occupy these positions are often overwhelmed by the multiple and ambiguous demands being placed on them. They can much more easily set priorities, find areas of clarity and control, and reestablish their own sense of self-esteem and competency, when given feedback regarding areas of effective performance. What if there are multiple stakeholders involved in a performance appraisal? Then an appreciative approach is of particular value, for the recipient of the feedback can focus on areas in which several different people discovered strengths and competence. They are less inclined to focus on areas where the various stakeholders disagreed about failure or incompetence. We can more readily find the thimble, or a point of maximum effectiveness, when appreciative feedback comes from several different directions or perspectives.

What is distinctive about an appreciative approach used in the appraisal of an employee's performance? First, an appreciative appraisal requires that we place any review of an employee's performance within a specific time and place. Performance appraisal should always be contextual in nature, if it is to be appreciative. What was happening around the employee when he was being observed or rating? In what ways is the setting in which the employee works *skill-enhancing* and in what ways is the setting *de-skilling*? As many process-engineering gurus have noted, we should first look to the system and processes of the system when looking at the performance of any employee. The characteristics of the system and its processes are likely to have a much greater impact on the performance of any one employee than are the specific skills, knowledge or aptitudes that this employee possesses.

We must first appreciate the context within which the employee is being evaluated. We must then share our understanding of this context when providing the employee with our appreciative feedback. In this way the employee will not only learn more about his own performance—but will also better understand ways in which his performance is being influenced positively and negatively by the setting in which he is working. Improvements in performance can be made, as a result, by not only increasing the employee's skills or knowledge, or by helping the employee shift his attitude, but also by changing the setting in which the employee works. We can provide the employee with a good reason to improve his attitude about work that he performs.

A second characteristic of an appreciative appraisal concerns the focus of this appraisal. An appreciative appraisal focuses on the strengths, competencies and successes of the employee: *We catch them when they are doing it right!* This doesn't mean that we only provide feedback about what is good, for a fundamental assumption that underlies an appreciative perspective is that an employee has sufficient personal strength and integrity to handle the information being provided during a feedback session. We don't need to ease in on the feedback we are giving. We don't need to balance or sequence positive and negative feedback. This balancing process is sometimes called a *feedback sandwich*: positive feedback coming first, followed by negative feedback, then once again positive feedback to finish it off. The positive feedback serves only as the buffer—the bun. The negative feedback is the meat. It is what really matters.

An appreciative approach suggests instead that we offer the feedback unvarnished. However, we offer it in a manner that invites dialogue rather than one-way conversation. Chris Argyris and Don Schon call this appreciative process: *advocacy inviting inquiry*. We advocate by providing the recipient of feedback with our own observations and conclusions regarding their performance. We then invite inquiry by asking the recipient to provide a self-appraisal. I encourage the recipient of my feedback to comment on and critique this feedback. I suggest that the two of us engage in a dialogue that will hopefully lead to shared conclusions regarding her performance—and the accuracy and value of my feedback.

This dialogue, based on advocacy inviting inquiry, builds trust and a sense of mutual appreciation between the giver and recipient of the performance appraisal. This appreciative appraisal process creates a setting for mutual learning and development, rather than provoking "tit-for-tat" or "got you back" game playing. This appreciative dialogue is constructive. It serves as something more than a forum for mutually argumentative statements. By engaging in this advocacy inviting inquiry process, we learn about ourselves as observers and about effective performance appraisals. Both the giver and the recipient of the appraisal can use this dialogue to test personal assumptions and conclusions about the setting in which the appraisal has taken place. *Organizational learning takes place every time an appreciative appraisal is completed.* This is one final appreciative mantra.

