Head Light

HR processes exposed: What do they say about your culture?

part of our We think… series

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Have you considered how the HR processes in your business 'condition' your employees? Do you take a close look at the impact that they have on the psychological contract? Do you consider the extent to which management practices support your employer brand? Do your processes such as appraisal reflect how your business is, or was or is trying to be? Is it possible that how employees 'feel' about one process impacts their perception of and participation in others?

Let's consider an example using the appraisal process.

'It's appraisal time again and line managers are not looking forward to having to spend the time completing the paper work and employees generally aren't looking forward to the dreaded appraisal meeting itself. Unresolved issues that have been under the surface most of the year are going to be dragged out and documented and the usual unbearable 'schmoosing' upward to management will start if it hasn't already behind closed doors. Everyone will get given a 'rating' or score that they don't understand and by some process that is shrouded in secrecy. Some say that the score is used for bonus, some say a bad score will put you 'into the departure lounge'. It's not good that John (a colleague) and I haven't been seeing eye-to-eye lately and if he's going to be giving me some sort of a score, he'll put the knife in. Best I do too then. I'm not sure the forms we use really apply to my role and my Manager doesn't really understand the realities of the job I do, so we end up with these either circular or inconclusive discussions that inevitably require me to sign off on some vague action we all know won't happen. After all of this, it gets filed away and only used again if they want to stop me suing them if I get sacked or made redundant. The output of all of this seems pointless at best and everyone would rather not do it, but we have no choice on how, when and whether it's done.'

Clearly, there's something wrong with this performance appraisal and management process. We all know it as we see these problems, but often the root causes might appear elusive or beyond our ability to address. We hear this sentiment expressed regularly by the HR professionals we work with and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence in literature, blogs and articles. Do you ask about the appraisal process in your Exit interviews?

Just by looking at the example we can see issues of process, purpose, secrecy, relevance and consequently buy-in. Also what does this type of feedback say about how the organisation is run and what type of culture exists here? Similarly, with this process firmly in place and established as an organisational ritual, how are other, possibly better considered, constructed and more impactful HR processes and initiatives received? To a new recruit, candidate or even someone considering their next move in the organisation, does the above suggest an open, trusting, respectful or progressive working environment?

The buck stops here, as usual

As HR professionals, we have a huge opportunity (and some would say responsibility) to ensure that the processes we introduce and advocate all contribute to the positive development of organisational culture. Changing culture is a long-term programme – again there have been disastrous cases of attempts of wholesale 'big-bang' culture change programmes. We can effect change through many means including how HR processes are implemented. Surprisingly it is often the subtleties of "the rules" that have a big impact. According to Coens & Jenkins (2002) in their seminal and iconoclastic work "*Abolishing Performance Appraisals*", the 'rules' disclose the assumptions that the organisation makes about its employees – the nature of people as trustworthy or not, what motivates people and influences their behaviours, how people should be managed, the way works gets done, and beliefs about how communication, improvement and change occur.

A process that exhibits overt control can have very harmful side effects. For example, the natural human response to any form of control is to resist it. The resistance might be very direct and obvious, but in organisations this is not usually the case. Resistance, at one end of the spectrum manifests itself as disengagement, and at the other, saboteur-type passive-aggressive behaviour (see our other article on Fairness in Talent Management on our website).

For most, where the output of the process seems to count for very little, then disengagement and cynicism are often the result. If the dice are loaded with the outcome affecting reward, then the scene is set for dysfunctional and destructive behaviour. The provision of very little latitude, the feeling of it "being done to them" is repaid with apathy, form filling and box ticking to just get it out of the way with as little pain and as much gain as possible. This is hardly the intent, is so often the outcome and does our employer, employees and profession a great disservice.

HR processes, engagement and employer branding

Surely it's vital that your organisational processes act as a delivery mechanism for the things you promise staff? Organisations with strong employer brands have developed a clear employee value proposition. This is translated through company actions and communicated through leadership behaviour and leads to emotional (e.g. "*I enjoy working here*") and rational benefits (*"This organisation cares about my career development")* for employees. These employee value propositions reflect the image the organisation wants to portray to the talent it wants to project, although there is sometimes a mismatch between the expectations of staff who are attracted to a company and the reality of being part of that organisation.

Employer brands are sustainable when they are consistently reflected in the actions and behaviours of leaders and embodied by company policies, procedures, and practices. Sartain and Schumann (2006) defined employer brand as "*how a business builds and packages its identity, from its origins and values, what it promises to deliver to emotionally connect employees so that they in turn deliver what a business promises to customers*." By implementing HR processes which involve, support, develop, nurture and enable employees to do what they do best every day, your employer brand will act to retain and motive your employees*.*

It might be simpler than you think

It's important to point out that we're not offering any magic silver bullet to "fix appraisals", but we are offering a way to diagnose and start to address the issues by changing the way we think about how our HR processes are implemented.

Nevertheless, ask these questions of your appraisal processes. Is there a focus on the on-going dialogue between managers and their teams? Or is there more of an organisational focus (communicated via policy, training courses and managerial objectives) on the paperwork? What does this say about the culture of the organisation, and what impact is it having on your employer brand? Could changing any of these things help to drive up engagement levels within the company?

If we were to review the above appraisal example again and distil out the questions your employees and managers might ask of the appraisal process, then there might be some very simple strategies that can make a big impact.

Question	It could be as simple as:
Do I have some influence on how I am performance reviewed and is it transparent?	For a 360 review, allowing the employee to select who might review them, moderating that choice and the resultant review. Be transparent as to who is reviewing and allow people a chance to decline to review. Check if your 360 tool can support this, if not choose Talent 360.
Do I have some control and have I been given the tools to use to find out how I can develop my career in this organisation?	Provide sample career paths and show how specific skills, experiences and behaviours need to develop to enable their progression. Talent Navigator is such a tool that can enhance development planning.
Am I being assessed against the role I actually perform or some arbitrary measure?	Create assessments/behavioural questionnaires that reflect the required behaviours in actual roles and segment people based on their role/job family or department. Talk to us about creating these assessments from scratch, or using your role profiles as a start or developing them from the Head Light Competency Framework or the standards used by the Chartered Management Institute, of which we are a licensee.
As a manager do I have the skills and resources to handle the appraisal effectively to meet needs and expectations?	A poorly handled appraisal meeting creates problems that can take years to remedy, if ever. Ensure the management population have got the skills to manage feedback. Find out with Talent FQ, our feedback capability assessment and if they need development, our Feedback Training course will be well worth it.

Summary

Researchers have been questioning whether there is still a place for performance appraisal in organisations since the 1980's but like it or loathe it, performance appraisal remains a feature of corporate life in the noughties and despite its poor reputation, employees and employers are reluctant to abandon it altogether. So it's here to stay and worth doing well yet we need to think more flexibly and creatively about how it is done within our organisations. By moving away from some of the old rituals and legacies currently undermining our efforts, we can improve the performance of our HR processes and develop our organisations' culture and employer brand with consistency and sustainability.

References and further reading:

Mark Schumann & Libby Sartain (2009) Brand for Talent: Eight Essentials to Make Your Talent as Famous as Your Brand. Jossey Bass.

Tom Coens & Mary Jenkins (2002) Abolishing Performance Appraisals: Why they backfire and what to do instead. Berrett Koehler.

Robert Bacal (1999) Performance Management. McGraw Hill.

Dr. Nigel Hunt (2007) Conducting Staff Appraisals. British Journal of Administrative Management.

Next steps

If you would like to take a closer look at how you can review your HR and Talent Management processes, please get in touch.

About Head Light

Head Light is an award-winning talent management software and consulting firm that works with clients to define and implement impactful talent management strategies.

Talent Cloud® is our cloud-based portfolio of integrated talent management software tools designed for those who expect the maximum return from talent management processes. Our training and consulting services uniquely complement our breakthrough software that engages employees, managers and senior leaders in the selection, development and progression of people in their businesses.

Companies in the FTSE 350, public sector, large and small, from retailers to high tech innovators have all benefitted from our tools, techniques and expertise. Founded in 2004, we are headquartered in the UK.

Head Light has attained the ISO27001 standard for Information Security. Certificate No 217613.

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