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TOWARDS ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE THROUGH PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

By

Mary Magdaline Pereira

1. INTRODUCTION

“Performance” and “productivity” have become among the buzzwords in discussions relating to vision 2020. The extent of its importance is evidenced by the use of the concept of “performance-related-pay” even in the public sector now, under the New Remuneration System (NRS). With this emphasis on performance, performance appraisal cannot remain an option or a matter of discretion; it becomes a necessity, both in terms of policy and procedure.

This paper will examine and evaluate the performance appraisal system practised in ITM for the purposes of promotion and annual appraisal of lecturers. This paper will also suggest ways to increase the effectiveness of the performance appraisal system in ITM.

This descriptive analysis and evaluation is based on : firstly, a review of documents, circulars and appraisal forms which are used in the performance appraisal system in ITM; secondly, an examination of the process of appraisal in ITM, based on participant observation and feedback from lecturers; and, thirdly, a comparison with basic principles and current trends in performance appraisal.

2. OBJECTIVES OF PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

The broad objective of performance appraisal is, “to provide accurate, timely evaluations of the capabilities of an organization’s current human resources, with a forward look toward future needs”. (Yoder and Staudohar, 1986). It provides a rational basis for many decisions affecting the personnel in an organization. Basically, performance appraisal systems are used to : i) set work objectives, ii) assess work performance for salary and promotion purposes and, iii) improve the performance of individual employees.

However, a poorly done performance appraisal is a waste of time for all concerned and has dire consequences on many other areas of personnel management such as salary administration, training and development, merit pay decisions and morale and motivation of employees.

3. THE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL SYSTEM IN ITM

The annual performance appraisal of lecturers is supposed to be done every year by the evaluation committee at the school level, using form ITM/KA/1/89. It is supposed to be an open appraisal system where the results of the evaluation are discussed with and made known to the appraisee.

With the implementation of the NRS, the annual performance appraisal has become mandatory because it is the basis for merit pay decisions. This being the case, it is crucial that the annual performance appraisal system is able to provide valid and accurate information which will result in decisions which are perceived to be fair and just. Although the performance appraisal system for the purpose of promotion to the post of senior lecturer seems to be more rigorous and time consuming, its credibility has often been questioned by lecturers and it has often resulted in feelings of discontent among lecturers.

In examining and evaluating the appraisal system for both these purposes, this paper will look into the sources of error in terms of the i) design of the performance appraisal system, and ii) the administration of the performance appraisal system in ITM.

3.1 The Design of the Performance Appraisal System

The design of the performance appraisal system includes the objectives, methods and performance measures used in the system. This establishing of objectives and performance measures is probably the most difficult part of designing an effective performance appraisal system. Although one may be familiar with the objectives or goals of ITM at the institutional level, it is necessary to operationalize these objectives at the functional level by establishing institution-relevant objectives for individual positions, such as the position of lecturer. For each position, specific end-results must be identified and must be assigned priorities. These objectives, end-results and their measurements must be understood and agreed on by both the appraiser and appraisee. Job analysis is a crucial element in the design of performance appraisal systems because it provides the basis for identifying objectives and performance measures.

In ITM, one wonders whether job analysis figures at all in the design of the performance appraisal system. Are the goals and objectives for the position of lecturer in ITM based on the job analysis for that position or is it dependent on the perceptions of certain individuals? Ten years ago, "research and publication" was hardly ever mentioned when one talked about promotion in ITM but now, it is considered an important aspect of the functions of a lecturer in ITM. While acknowledging that this is a move in the right direction this paper maintains that there is a possible conflict of perception between lecturers and the management regarding

the objectives and functions of a lecturer in ITM. This paper also maintains that there is a lack of effective communication regarding the performance appraisal system resulting in a lack of information, acceptance, understanding and commitment on the part of lecturers.

Rhiannon Chapman (1990), writing about personnel management in the 1990s, predicts that "industrial democracy will find increasing expression in workplace schemes for the greater involvement and participation". There is increasing evidence to suggest that employee participation and involvement in the design and administration of performance appraisal systems will result in a higher level of acceptance and cooperation from employees. When employees themselves are involved in setting goals, it tends to lead to higher goals than when goals are set unilaterally. Even the Japanese are talking about "open management". This is also in line with Vision 2020 which aspires to create a mature, democratic and caring society.

Therefore, this paper recommends that there be greater participation of lecturers in the setting of objectives and performance measures, based on an accurate job analysis. The performance appraisal system should also be effectively communicated to not just the appraisers, but also the appraisees, so as to eliminate conflicting perceptions and to enable the lecturers to channel their energies towards institute-relevant objectives.

Another important aspect of the design of the performance appraisal system that this paper is concerned about is regarding the criteria or performance measures used to evaluate and measure the contribution and performance of lecturers in ITM. Whether the performance measures are behaviour-based, objective-based or trait-oriented, it is crucial that they are valid and reliable. This means that the criteria used to measure performance must be specific, objective and related as closely as possible to job outcomes. In the United States of America, the courts have mandated that appraisals be based on objective criteria obtained from job analysis. Also, appraisals must be based on pre-established and well-publicized criteria (Townley, 1990).

When one examines the criteria used for the annual performance appraisal of lecturers in ITM, it is evident that all the criteria are related only to the teaching function of lecturers; there is no attempt to measure the "research and publication" function and the "administrative leadership/contribution to society" function, both of which are criteria used in the appraisal for promotion purposes. This incongruence only serves to strengthen further the doubts expressed earlier in this paper as to whether or not the appraisal system in ITM is based on a proper job analysis.

It is the contention of this paper that the criteria used in the annual performance appraisal, as stated in form ITM/KA/1/89, are not precise and inadequate, and place too much emphasis on personality factors, such as initiative, personal appearance, commitment and cooperation. Such a system gives too much room for subjectivity and prejudice, whether conscious or otherwise. This will result in inaccurate and invalid appraisals which in turn, will result in wrong, unfair decisions by Management and resentment among lecturers.

As for the criteria used in the appraisal for the purpose of promotion to the post of senior lecturer, this paper contends that there is an inbuilt bias in favour of lecturers who also hold administrative posts, because this is one of the criteria used in the appraisal process for promotions. Lecturers must not be evaluated on factors over which they have no control or influence; most lecturers do not hold administrative posts, even after serving in ITM for more than 10 years, not because they are not capable or willing but simply because they were never given the opportunity. Moreover, there are too few of these posts available and very often the same few persons have a monopoly over them.

While acknowledging that subjectivity cannot be eliminated completely, this paper urges the designers of the performance appraisal system in ITM to take measures to reduce errors due to subjective appraisals, discard criteria which may be potentially discriminatory, and introduce more criteria which are related to job outcomes and critical job behaviours based on proper job analysis.

3.2 The Administration Of The Performance Appraisal System

A well-designed performance appraisal system may break down or go awry if it is not communicated effectively to both the appraiser and the appraisee. Both the appraiser and appraisee must be given all the relevant information regarding the appraisal system and training on how to use the system.

In ITM, the appraisers face many problems in administering the performance appraisal system, very often through no fault of their own. Weaknesses in the design of the appraisal system result in weaknesses in its administration. For example, because the criteria used are often not precise enough and often overlapping, it results in subjective assessments being made. Assessment of teaching abilities of the lecturer is made on the basis of a 30 minute observation in the lecture room, or no observation at all. Appraisers are not briefed before hand or given training on how to use the system of appraisal; although guidelines are provided, they are often vague and may even encourage perceptual inaccuracies on the part of the appraiser. The annual performance

appraisal probably suffers from "central tendency error" because its guidelines as stated in form ITM/KA/1/89, say that most lecturers will score 4,5 or 6 on a scale of 1 to 9.

This absence of training and briefing also results in inconsistent application of procedures and appraisal methods, not only across schools but also within individual schools since the appraisal is done by a panel of appraisers. These appraisers also often have to work under tight time constraints. These weaknesses are also apparent in the appraisals done by students.

In ITM at the moment, performance appraisal through the interview method is also used for promotion purposes where the interview carries 15% of the total score. Many lecturers will attest to the fact that this interview has often been used to ridicule and humiliate the interviewee or used as a platform for union-bashing. These practices actually negatively affect the validity of such appraisals.

From the perspective of the appraisee, perhaps the most significant problem in the administration of the performance appraisal system is the lack of information regarding the system. Lecturers are not informed of the performance measures, objectives and procedures in advance. Very often, they are aware of these things only when they have to fill up the relevant forms. There is a lack of openness and effective communication which results in lecturers being distrustful and wary of performance appraisal. Appraisees are not told how they have fared in the student appraisal or appraisal for promotion purposes. There is fear of victimisation and unfair practices, especially if the appraisers are perceived as unqualified or lacking in integrity. Lecturers are not informed as to provisions for appeal against decisions made.

This paper recommends that the management communicates the performance appraisal system to the lecturers effectively and frequently. Both appraisers and appraisees must be briefed and trained to use the appraisal system. Appraisers must be selected from among persons who have credibility in the eyes of the appraisees. There must be full documentation of the appraisal and provision for appeal by the appraisee. Performance feedback must be given frequently to the appraisee. The appraisee must be given the opportunity to express himself on performance-related issues.

4. CONCLUSION

While this paper has highlighted some of the weaknesses and problems in the performance appraisal system for lecturers in ITM, it has been done with the

intention of increasing the effectiveness of that system based on the belief that performance appraisal is a very useful management tool, especially as we move towards 2020, in pursuit of academic excellence.

Accordingly, this paper has also made various suggestions and recommendations to rectify and improve the performance appraisal system. However, this must be paralleled by the strengthening and upgrading of the "personnel department" of ITM because the performance appraisal system cannot remain "static" and unchanging; it needs to be constantly monitored and reviewed from time to time because change is endemic in our society.

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