

Review of Performance Appraisal and Objective Assessment of Subordinate Officers in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Annual Performance Appraisal and Objective Assessment of Subordinate Officers in Nigeria Public Sector Organization have a deep crack and division, because the former does not in objective and real terms, reflect and approximate the latter. We are aware that the Annual Performance Evaluation Report (APER), which is commonly used in Nigeria public sector organization especially in the public service, is a mere ritual. The assessment often carried out by the superior officers does not represent an objective assessment of the subordinate officers. Consequently, performance appraisal and objective assessment of subordinate officers have remained a troublesome cleft in Nigeria public sector organization. The present work is an attempt to reconcile and resolve the troublesome cleft: first, through proper academic clarification of both concepts for better understanding and appreciation by the users and scholars, secondly, through explication of some other related relevant concepts such as performance, performance standards and performance evaluation: finally, through identification of problems associated with objective assessment of subordinate officers and suggestions for making performance appraisal a tool of management.

Key Words: Performance Appraisal, Public Sector Organisation, Subordinate Officer

Introduction

Performance appraisal has been defined as the process of evaluating the performance and qualifications of the employees in terms of the requirements of the job for which they are performance and qualifications of the employees in terms of the requirements of the job for which they are employed, for the purpose of administration including placement. Selection and other action, which require preferential treatment among members of a group as distinguished from actions in respect of their current performance as well as their potential for future development.

Appraisal performance is one of the most important and yet one of the most difficult tasks that manager's face. It is very difficult to evaluate a person's performance and even more difficult to convey that judgment to him or her. This process is very essential, however, because performance appraisals help both employers and employees in the following ways:

- They give employees the opportunity to indicate the direction and level of their ambition;
- They give managers the opportunity to indicate interest in employees' development. This can be a motivational tool to help the organization retain ambitious, capable employees instead of losing them to competitors;



- They identify areas of where specific training is needed, or available;
- They provide encouragement to the employee who has been trying to perform well;
- They provide means for communicating and documenting dissatisfaction with unacceptable employee performance;
- They keep records of efforts to improve it;
- They provide evaluation for pay decision – this is by far the most common use (Comings & Schwab, 1978).

Objectives of Performance Appraisal

A good performance appraisal system in a public sector organization like the federal or state civil service should be able to achieve the following:

- Enable each officer to increase his/her output or productivity;
- Assist an officer to understand his strength and weakness and on the basis of these propose remedies;
- Provide an officer better understanding of the ways in which he/she fits into the service and makes him a more effective worker in a team and one who other superior officers will respect and like to work with;
- Enable the subordinate's performance to be thoroughly analyzed;
- Facilitate the process of just and equitable reward and compensation (Udoji, 1974).

The result of performance appraisal should serve as the basis for regular evaluation of the performance of the members of an organization. Whether an individual is judged to be competent, effective or ineffective, promotable or unpromotable, etc. is based upon the information generated by the performance appraisal system (Rarick, 2011).

Conceptual Clarification and Explanation

It will appear pertinent at this point to define or explain some key concepts and words that we shall come across during our discussion. This is to ensure good understanding or appreciation of what the work is all about.

First we have "Assessment of Subordinate Officers". Assessment of Subordinate Officers in an employment setting that has been described over the years by personnel authors and practitioners in a number of different ways. Some of the common descriptions include performance appraisal/evaluation, merit rating, behavioural assessment, employee evaluation, personnel review/appraisal, progress report, service rating and fitness report. Some personnel specialists use the concept interchangeably while others attach special interpretations to some of these appraisal phrases.

Secondly, "Performance". Performance is multidimensional. Its elements include effectiveness, economy, efficiency, productivity, quality and behaviour. Performance can thus be tangible or behavioural (Gbeja, 1983). According to Ducker (1964), to an employee "Performance is the consistent ability to produce results over prolonged period of time and in a variety of assignments". There is however a school of thought amongst modern management scholars which argues that ability is neither performance nor result/outputs (Kerman & Durham, 2009).

According to the scholars, ability is an input like such factors/traits as initiatives, penetration, foresight, loyalty, integrity, leadership, etc. They have also pointed out that where these factors/traits/qualities are the basis for assessment, subjectivity becomes a significant problem.

Thirdly, “performance standard”. A standard performance is a statement of the results that will exist when a job is satisfactorily performed in the eyes of the team leader. In a sense, standards are negotiated, exactly how well they perform: they give one (assessor) a way of measuring performance instead of measuring people (i.e. a way of controlling work instead of people). In the professional approach to management, the expected result written down after discussion with the subordinates is called standards of performance. Towards this end, measurement terms like “how much”, “how well”. “When” and “in what way”, are often employed. What is being said, in effect is that performance standards are set by specifying:

- Quantity of output (expected of an employee/machine);
- Quality of output (expected of an employee/machine);
- Timelines of output;
- Effectiveness in use of resources;
- Manner of performance and method of performance assignment. Such standards must satisfy the basic condition of being consistent and relevant. They must also be seen to be fair, just reasonable and attainable. In addition, the performance standards must be amenable to the objectives of the organization and it must not be subjectively set (Makovic & Newman, 1987).

Finally, “performance evaluation”. This according to the United States Office of Personnel Management, means “all periodic written assessment of job performance measured against responsibilities, goals and/or tasks, specific duties assigned and agreed to as well as identification of strengths and weaknesses demonstrated by employee’s potential and training or development needs” (US/OPM, 1980). The merit of this definition is that it sees performance evaluation as a regular and continuous process by which the quality, quantity and levels of performance and the various factors that influence performance are assessed and evaluated. It also involves an appraisal of the growth potential of an employee, with a view to providing the organization with information that not only leads to positive actions but also ensures that individuals are provided with necessary feedback for performance improvements, personal growth and job satisfaction.

Purposes of Objective Assessment of Subordinate Officers

Within the context of the Nigerian Public service, personnel performance appraisal is done essentially for deciding promotion. But modern management practice sees the purpose of assessment in a broader perspective. There are two major overlapping reasons for objective assessment of subordinate officers, which according to Philips (1985) are:

To improved the management of staff resources by helping employees realize and fully utilize their potentials while trying to achieve organizational goals. Included in this broad category is its efficacy in helping managers and supervisor to:

1. Stimulate improved work performance and commitment to organizational goals;
2. Assign work more effectively;

3. Improve job placement, i.e. Make better job matches;
 4. Keep employees advised of what is expected of them and how well they are meeting the expectation;
 5. Recognize and more effectively deal with personnel problems, including training needs, development assignments. Etc;
 6. Assist employees in preparing career plans and goals;
 7. Foster an effective working partnership between supervisors and employees; and
 8. Recognize employee's potentials for development as executives and managers.
- To provide employees, supervisors, and managers with the information necessary for decision-making in the following areas:

Merit Promotion: Management Appraisal of subordinate's performance in the present job is a way of assessing the individual's qualification or suitability for selection for another (perhaps higher) position.

Career Development: performance appraisal should provide information on the subordinate's training needs.

Recognition and Awards: Sometimes, the main purpose of assessing subordinate's performance is to establish a basis for awards or other recognition for excellent contribution to the achievement of organizational goals. This of course, boosts the ego of such staff. Even those staff that does not have such recognition would be pushed by the desire to have them.

Probationary Period Completion: Probationary period refers to that of an employee's work history, when he or she must be carefully observed so as to determine their suitability for a chosen career. The period varies from organization to organization. Whatever the length of the probationary period, it has been found that detailed written periodic performance assessments are indispensable data for ascertaining fitness.

Lateral Reassignments: The advisability of making reassignments (for personnel management reasons) including on-the-job training, better job-employee matches, or unacceptable performance in the current job, may become apparent during performance appraisal.

Warning or counseling: Information obtained from carefully conducted performance appraisal may reveal a problem for which a warning or some form of counseling is desirable. The end result of this could be an increase in productivity when employees take them seriously.

Approaches to Assessment of Subordinate Officers

Evaluating performance of staff is a lot easier than evaluating organizational performance. Although the former dovetails into the latter, there is a difference with regard to the criteria evaluated as well as the instrument used. Because of the problems and difficulties that have plagued the issue of how best to appraise the performance of staff, management

scholars have recently been taking a hard look at the question, what exactly is being appraised? Some vehemently deny that we can appraise people objectively (McGregor, 1959; Kelly, 1958). The focus of known schemes could be categorized into four definable orientations (Gbeja, 2000). These are:

1. *Appraisals that focus on Behaviour and Personality;*
2. *Appraisals that focus on Work Activities;*
3. *Appraisals that focus on Comparisons; and*
4. *Appraisals that focus on Results.*

In the category of appraisal that emphasize Behaviour and personality are:

Trait Appraisal (Graphic Rating Scale): This is the most widely used performance evaluation technique. Here, series of traits or job-related behavior characteristic are presented on scale and the evaluator is required to rate employee on each of such traits as initiative, penetration, foresight, leadership, reliability, etc. obviously, apart from the measurement problem this techniques presents, trait ate neither performance no results and the exercise is usually unilateral.

The Essay Appraisal: The essay appraisal is one where the appraiser writes one or more paragraphs about the employee's strengths, weaknesses, and behavior on the job, e.g. Mr. Sani is a novice in memo writing or produces brilliant minutes. It permits in-depth comments, eliminates a fixed set of expectancies and allows a broad focus to meet individual differences. Besides, variability in length and content may make comparisons difficult, in addition to traits problems.

Process Appraisal: This method requires series of statements that represent standards of effective behavior on the job. Then actual behavior is compared with process behavior standard to identify the strength or weakness of the behavior, e.g. absenteeism, tardiness. Alcoholism, violation of rules, and insubordination. Whilst it may specify behavior that would ensure effectiveness, the problem of measurement remains. Beside, employees with terrible behaviour have been found to perform well.

Behaviour Anchoring: This implies replacement of such words as "Excellent", "Good", "Average" with short descriptions of actual job behavior, e.g. under "Relations with colleagues", instead of "Poor", the anchor may be "fights with colleagues often", or instead of "Excellent" the behavior anchor may be "inspires team spirit". Whilst this method avoids over generosity and leniency, it is over-simplified and not all behaviours have cause-effect relationship. All trait-related appraisals have measurement and objectivity problems.

As for the category that emphasizes work activities we have the followings:

Ranking Appraisals: The method involves an employee ranking technique in which supervisors are asked to choose the "most valuable" and "least valuable". Paired comparison ranking or normal distribution ranks are two popular methods for this procedure. Whilst this permits overall ranking of staff it has no standard form. Minor impression may take strong priority in the evaluation, and it may not focus on important jobs.

Forced-Choice Appraisal: This sets up standards of comparison among individuals. The assessor is required to choose from categories of statements, those that accurately fit the individual being rated. Also, he is forced to select statements that least describe are by definition, the better employees. The advantage is that the rated does not know what value is assigned to each statement (which usually incorporates an element required for the job); it tends to be more objective. But the method tends to be expensive, unilateral, and susceptible to “halo” effect and the assessor is forced to select one or another statement with no choice between.

Training Stimulation Appraisal: this is recent technique for rating performance under a job situation. The assessee is given, under stimulated conditions, the task he or she is expected to accomplish in real situation. The appraisee is compared with others who do the same work. It affords opportunity for a whole evaluation and permit counseling. If video-taped, the assessee can see points of corrections. The disadvantage is however the “distance factor” of the real world. That is, reality is different from stimulations, no matter how close.

Appraisals that focus on results are usually MBO (Management by Objectives) appraisal. More recently, there has been a swing towards the result-oriented approach and to participation by the job holder, both in setting the objectives or targets and in appraising its own performance against these. The results-oriented approach is generally considered to be more effective because:

It relates directly to the requirements of the job and standards of performance required to achieve the organization’s target. It is more objective because it is based on actual result achieved not on personality traits which may or may not result in the desired performance. It measures performance against yardsticks which are clearly realistic, understood and accepted. It involves more effective communication between the supervisor and the subordinate officer. It should result in a clear, agreed plan of action for improving performance. It helps to motivate the subordinate officer to improve his performance; etc (Pay & Waltham, 2012). The other approaches can be similarly assessed, especially in terms of how objective they are and what their effects are likely to be on improving performance.

Components of Performance Appraisals

Target Setting: A crucial component of personnel performance appraisal is target setting. Targets provide direction or focus. A target is a measure of work set a subordinate officer to achieve within a stipulated time and given the necessary resources. The process in getting this through is characterized as target setting. There are usually two types of targets, viz., goal and resources targets. The goal target is about performance expressed specifically in the quality of work, the quality and the time span for their achievement. The resource target comprises the necessary materials for achievement with consideration of all possible constraints and obstacles (Carroll & Schneider, 1982). Conventionally, it is canvassed that targets must be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound (SMART). To these, we may add such other characteristics as: acceptable by the task performance; acceptable to organization (e.g. Boss, department);

Capable of being self-monitored; assessable if not measurable; achievable in stages with self-monitoring; can be altered or amended as circumstances change; should generate interest (stimulation motivation); Relevant to current organizational needs. Target setting involves a wide range of systematic activities aimed at translating organization's goals into individual performance target.

Job Description: This is a statement of the general purpose of the job, providing an outline of the duties and responsibilities involved. For staff appraisal to be objective, individual jobholders should have job descriptions written in terms of tangible and specific expectations. The ingredients of job description are as follows:

Job title; Department (in which the jobholder work); Function of job (why does the job exist); Responsible to (job title of boss); Responsible for (job title of subordinate); Tasks (possibly between routine and occasional); Hours of work; Working conditions (if they materially affect the job).

Lack of Resources: Even where targets have been objectively set, lack of necessary resources for implementation has often frustrated the efforts. Resources range from money to vehicles, stationery, etc. Many promotion exercises were known to have been stalled by lack of stationery.

Problems Associated with Objective Assessment of Subordinate Officers

Some of the main problems which make objective Assessment of subordinate officers difficult include:

- Poor knowledge of the role of performance appraisal as a tool of management by many Nigerian workers and supervisors; hence the undue emphasis on some negative preparations which cripple the process even before it commences.
- Cultural Values: There is a strong cultural value, which confers respect to the elderly and makes the younger appraiser incapable practically of telling his elderly subordinate what he thinks about him and his performance. Our culture even seems to show aversion to telling somebody negative things about himself. Where such is the true assessment of him. This calls for a change in order to enhance performance.
- Lack of internal capacities for understanding and administering the new APER.
- *Limited Resources:* Establishing realistic and measurable targets in our type of system can be an uphill task since we are not always sure that resources required for the attainment of these targets will be available and within the reach of the worker right through the implementation stages of set objectives targets.
- Poor objectivity by supervising officers.
- Poor knowledge of subordinate staff and their jobs on the part of many supervising officers.
- Fear of reprisals in the case of adverse reports being issued on some subordinate officers.
- Poor feedback to employees
- Inadequate hasty preparations.



- Lack of management support.
- Failure to apply evaluation data in personnel decision-making and personnel development negates the primary purpose of; performance evaluation, etc.

Recommendations/Suggestions for Making Performance Appraisal a Tool of Management

The following are some of the recommendations and suggestions to ensure objective assessment of subordinate officers. In other words, to ensure that performance appraisal reflects and approximates objective assessment of subordinate officers; thus, reconciling and resolving the troublesome cleft. The suggestions for making performance appraisal a tool of management include:

1. Assessment of subordinate officers should be done more than once a year and not a post-mortem exercise;
2. Only direct and immediate supervisors should assess subordinate;
3. Inputs for assessment should be gathered daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly and the report is complemented at the end of each year;
4. An atmosphere of peace and stability, devoid of bitterness and mistrust is a prerequisite for objective assessment of subordinate officers;
5. The system must be more objective by not confusing personality with performance and measuring outputs rather than inputs;
6. Performance appraisal instruments must be simple, not cumbersome;
7. The exercise should be seen as a way of fostering partnership between superior and subordinate officers. It should not be a unilateral exercise;
8. The system must be open and should give performance feedback to both the appraiser and appraisee;
9. Assess performance in terms of time, cost, quantity and quality;
10. Design and apply appropriate instruments for performance evaluation (i.e avoid using the same entrenchment for every job but endeavour to have a uniform guide);
11. Both the superior officer and his subordinate meet at the beginning of the performance period to agree on what to do and the standard of measurement;
12. During the appraisal interview, the superior officer must always acknowledge good performance before pointing out areas that need improving. The interview must end on a positive note with a promise of help from the superior;
13. In addition to requisite skills, knowledge and attitude to carry out routine assignment, the staff must also possess communication, human relations, analytical and supervisory skills;
14. The Administration and Personnel Departments must needs to use the assessee; etc.
15. There is urgent need to install in the public sector organization performance ethic and target setting machinery. A reward system tied to performance or non-performance should be introduced. This will propel staff to exert necessary efforts or dissuade them from dysfunctional work ethics



Conclusion

In conclusion, it is pertinent to state that there is no performance-appraisal system in the world that is completely objective. For any performance appraisal system to be objective (and thereby effectual in public service delivery). It may meet the following four conditions:

- It must focus on results or output rather than performance traits;
- It must be done at least quarterly or hold year;
- It must be open; and
- It must provide opportunity for positive-neutral-positive feedback;
- Above all, performance appraisal can become a dynamic instrument for stimulating performance if employees are constantly informed of what to expect of them and equally afforded the opportunity to make amends.

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