

**Appraisal
Skills**

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Produced by
Connaught Training Limited
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hampshire GU11 3HR
UK

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Introduction

The success or failure of an appraisal system depends upon the skill of the managers involved in its operation. The real purpose of appraisal is to make people more effective in their jobs, but this cannot be achieved by systems and paperwork alone. It is the communication process that takes place in the appraisal interview that transforms the system into an active, constructive activity and therefore one which benefits both the individual and the organization.

The Appraisal Interview is a critical event in the working lives of both manager and managed, however frequently it is carried out. For managers it provides the opportunity to learn how their staff feel about their work and what can be done both to improve their performance and add to their motivation. For the managed it is the opportunity to learn exactly what is to be done differently and more importantly to learn how it should be done.

The skill required in this activity is of a high level but all too often managers are introduced at the deep end, on the assumption that, because they are managers, they will automatically have the skill required. The result may be disastrous for themselves or their subordinates. An unskilfully handled appraisal interview may do more harm than good. This is why training in appraisal interviewing skills is so important in initiating, maintaining or developing appraisal systems and it is towards this aspect that this video is directed.

Purpose of the video

'Appraisal Skills' is produced to demonstrate how skill in the interview situation can produce positive results. Conversely how lack of skill can have a negative or deleterious effect. It focuses particularly upon the benefits of structuring the interview in a purposeful way, the skilful use of a range of question types and the need to produce clear, concise action. It also deals with the important question of gaining the employee's commitment to that action rather than mere compliance.

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Synopsis

The opening shots show John Benham at home on the morning of his appraisal interview. From this we learn that John has his share of money worries and this leads to a discussion with his wife on the importance of his forthcoming interview. Promotion could solve their financial problems but John is also concerned about his running battle with the marketing department and whether his boss will see his point of view.

Arriving at the plant John has an immediate problem on the production line and we see him in heated altercation with one of his supervisors. On return to his office John has a call from his boss, Harold Mayhew, to tell him that he is ready to see him.

Harold is on the telephone when John enters and is clearly involved in a serious operational problem. He launches straight into the appraisal with little thought or preparation. In the middle the telephone rings again and the interview is closed abruptly leaving John in a worse situation than when he started.

The presenter appears and uses the interview to stress the importance of getting the environment and atmosphere right as well as the need for proper preparation and a clear understanding of purpose on both sides.

Next we see a second attempt at opening the interview which, whilst an improvement on the first, is still not successful and we are taken back through it by the presenter to see what went wrong. In the next scene Harold achieves a much more satisfactory result with a clear understanding of purpose and an agenda comprising the points John wants to discuss, including his future, to which Harold adds that he would like to hear John's thoughts about his supervisors.

The presenter now discusses the structure of an appraisal interview using graphics to illustrate the simple concepts of an opening, middle and ending. Having achieved an opening with the purpose clarified and an agenda built up. Harold will embark on the middle part. This will consist of the agenda items, each having a beginning, middle and ending of its own.

In the next scene Harold starts on John's stock level problem but things do not go well for them as Harold first puts John on the defensive and then solves the wrong problem. John complies reluctantly with Harold's solution. The presenter takes us back over the scene then Harold tries again. This time the result is much better and Harold, by skilful questions, gets John to reveal that the problem stems from the objectives that were set him at his first appraisal. Harold gets John to think through the problem and suggest a solution.

Harold then tackles the problem that has been worrying him, that of John's relationship with his supervisors which he feels has been deteriorating. His first attempt at meeting this head on fails, leaving John angry at his supervisors for talking behind his back. In his second attempt Harold elicits from John that, in order to meet his production targets, he has taken back the supervisors' responsibility for quality. John recognizes that he could have gone about it more tactfully and proposes meeting the supervisors and explaining the situation. Harold takes care to question John as to exactly how he will do it.

Having cleared away the present problems. Harold can now discuss John's future. He hears John's thoughts and gets him to redirect his thinking into providing evidence that he can in fact do a bigger job.

Finally the presenter introduces the ending, emphasizing the need to summarize actions agreed or imposed and then end by reinforcing success, leaving the appraisee confident of the future. In the first scene Harold does the summarizing himself and in doing so misses a signal from John that he is not very committed to one course of action previously agreed. The scene is repeated, this time with John summarizing. Harold picks up the point, there is further discussion after which John's commitment is assured.

Finally the presenter reiterates the salient points and stresses the benefits of skilful appraisal to the organisation as a whole.

Suggested uses

The video has four principal uses:-

- (1) As reinforcement to a formal training course or workshop on appraisal skills.
- (2) As a discussion medium for a 'mini' training session.
- (3) As a 'refresher' for trained appraisers before carrying out appraisals.
- (4) As a means of promoting the importance of training, e.g. on the introduction of an appraisal system.

Suggested Training Exercises

In all instances the learning can be enhanced by tutored discussion. There are 3 suggested discussion options:-

Option 1 for use with (1), (2) & (3) above
Option 2 for use with (2) & (3)
Option 3 for use with (3) & (4)

Whichever option is used it is important to preview the video, make notes on the particular aspects you want to emphasize and consider the implications to your organization's appraisal system. Make notes of the counter numbers on the video recorder at the points at which you are going to cut it.

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Option 1 (2 ½ hours)

Play the video and cut it immediately after the first (abortive) interview and before the presenter appears.

Explain that few interviews could be as bad as this, but probably everyone has experienced at least one of the errors. Get participants to tell you some of them.

Harold wasn't prepared.

He had not got the environment right, e.g. interruptions – coffee, telephone.

There was no shared understanding of the purpose of the interview.

Harold uses the emotive word 'problems' ('It seems you've got some problems John'). This put John on the defensive.

Harold was not prepared to listen to John's side of the story.

Because of the shortage of time John could not even begin to raise the question of his future.

In fact under the circumstances Harold should never have started the interview – all he did was to make matters worse.

Make a checklist together for 'preparation'.

Write up suggestions on a flipchart – add your own if necessary.

- Check appraisee's job description – any changes?
- Check last year's appraisal/objectives.
- What points do you want to discuss? – critical incidents?
- Evidence?
- What will he/she want to discuss – likely hang-ups?
- Any delicate areas? – what questions will open them up effectively?
- What new objectives would you like to set?

- Have you set sufficient time aside?
- Will you be free of interruption? – your office or elsewhere?
- How are you both going to sit? Remember your desk represents a barrier and a symbol of your authority – do you want this?
- Have you warned your secretary/switchboard no telephone calls?

Finally, remind them that things do not always turn out as planned. You may get fresh information during the interview which may mean changing your mind.

Explain that we are now going to see two examples of opening an interview.

Play the video and cut after-

Presenter: *It's going wrong for John, that's obvious, and he knows it, but what is not so obvious is it's going wrong for Harold but he doesn't know it*

Get them to tell you why it's going wrong.

Harold has forgotten the purpose – he has started to tell him rather than help him. More importantly he has got it all written down so it's going to be very difficult for him to change his mind.

Many appraisal systems require the form to be filled in first – how can you get round this? It might be a good idea to hold the interview, then fill in the form which should contain no surprises when the appraisee sees it.

Start the video – play to

John: *Yes I know, that's why I cut stock levels to 90% . . . there was no way of knowing that orders would be 50% up on last year . . .*

Harold: *Yes but surely last year chemists were over stocked from the previous year: did you make allowances for that John? John, it mustn't happen again: we must keep stock levels to an adequate level. You'd better get together with marketing every month and in good time to review off take against target . . . on reflection, I think I'd better be involved to make quite sure that Peter has no comebacks.*

John: *Well alright if you say so . . .*

Presenter: *O.K. Harold's identified the problem, got the information, given John the solution and he's going off to action it; nothing wrong with that . . . or is there?*

Invite comments.

He assumed that the problem was simply a question of too low stock levels.

He assumed the information he had from elsewhere was all there was worth knowing.

He assumed that the solution he **imposed** was with John's approval instead of compliance – 'Well alright – if you say so'.

Harold wasn't listening 'Yes but ...'

Start the video – play to

Harold: *Let's recap. The stock reduction exercise might have contributed; your decision to produce to 90% contributed but so did marketing by not giving you earlier warning. What you're suggesting is fine to avoid it in future. Bring me up to date when you've seen marketing – end of the month?*

John: *Yes – fine ... end of the month, and I'm sorry if I put you in a spot.*

There is every indication of commitment because John has suggested the solution himself. We are always more committed to our own plan than to someone else's.

Harold has set a definite time for the action.

Most importantly John has learned from the discussion and does not feel punished.

In the next scene Harold deals with something even more difficult, that is the sensitive question of relationships ...

Start the video – play to

Harold: *Hold on John, don't go off the deep end, it was only a casual remark. Just try to be a bit more tactful in the future, after all you can't risk upsetting those guys can you?*

Invite comments.

Harold was appearing to criticize ... 'they seem to be slipping a bit'. This caused an immediate defensive reaction.

He had no **real** evidence, only gossip which he assumed was fact.

Ask for suggestions on how Harold might introduce this question in a value-free way.

Start the video – play to

Presenter: *This is the second time that Harold has gone through the whole range of useful questions. Open question, probes, reflectives and closed. Then he checks and considers the information, finally producing clear and concise action.*

If you want to emphasize the need to ask questions in a value free way ask participants to re-frame the following questions:-

Was it time pressure or cost that governed your decision? (What factors governed your decision?)

I assume you checked it out fully with Administration?
(To what extent did you check it out with Administration?)

Couldn't you have been more tactful?
(Can you think of a different approach you might have used?)

I suppose you did it that way because . . .
(Why did you choose to do it that way?)

I've had a bad time from Marketing over your failure to . . .
(Tell me what happened when . . .)

I don't think it was very wise to tell Smith
(How did Smith come to know about it?)

Tell them Harold has now cleared the ground for discussing John's future.

This is a difficult area to discuss at appraisal since you may have very little direct influence. However it is of vital concern to the subject and you must remember that you are often the only link the subject has got into the organization's promotion network.

Discuss a strategy for Harold to adopt in this instance.

Start the video – play to

John: *Of course I'd like a promotion; and if I don't get it I'm not the only one who's going to be disappointed, but I hope it won't alter things between us?*

Harold: *No John, of course it won't. Personally I'd be sorry to see you go, but for your sake I'd be delighted.*

Invite comments.

He listened and then checked out his understanding.

He got him to redirect his thinking – He checked to see whether John had fallen into the trap of thinking that because he was doing his present job successfully it automatically meant he could do a larger job equally well. John needs to consider his **capacity** to do the bigger job, not past assessments.

He checked out the very important question of what would happen if John **did not** get promotion. It is very easy to raise expectations and store up trouble if they are not realized.

Tell them we now come to endings.

Ask them to suggest how the end should be structured.

Start the video – play to

John: *Yes, I'm going to need the time.*

Harold: *OK I'll draft out the form and let you have it in a couple of days. You know John, when all's said and done, we make a good team, let's keep it up shall we? That's it, not a bad appraisal was it?*

Invite comments.

Harold has missed that John does not seem entirely committed to the point about talking to the supervisors.

Start the video – play to the end.

Ask for suggestions on how to fill in the form as a result of the interview.

Use the Discussion Notes at Option 3 if appropriate.

Option 2 (1 1/2 hours)

Play the video through to the end of the third opening.

Harold: *Stock levels were top of your list so let's start with those . . .*

Ask how did the last opening differ from the first two?

- He picked on the good points of John's performance first, so he was receptive and more likely to discuss problems frankly. In the first two he put John on the defensive – 'looks like you've got some problems John' and 'I had a rough time from Peter over Sundown'.
- He cleared the purpose, not to **tell** him how he'd done ' . . . we'll discuss any of the things that are of concern to you, review last year's objectives and your performance and then use that to build next year's objectives and improvements.'
- He asked John what he wanted to talk about **first** so that he could see how the land lay.
- He signalled that he understood the importance John attached to his future.
- He was going to fill in the form **afterwards**; in the second interview he had it all written down so he would find it difficult to change his mind.
- He was listening.

Now carry on with the video and watch the scenes dealing with stock levels. Cut after the re-run of the second interview.

John: *Fine . . . end of the month and I'm sorry if I put you in a spot.*

Clarify if necessary the various question types:-

OPEN – Tell me about . . .

CLOSED – How many . . . ?

PROBES – What exactly did they say . . . ?

REFLECTIVE – Your future . . . ?

In the next section Harold is going to tackle John about his relationships

with his supervisors which he feels are slipping. This is a problem of changing behaviour.

Ask for suggestions about how he should handle it.

Play the next section to the end of the discussion, including the presenter's analysis and reiteration of the 'funnel'.

Harold is now going to discuss John's future.

Ask if this should be part of the appraisal interview.

N.B. It is important to make the point that if the subject wants to discuss it he or she must not be fobbed off – it may be of vital concern to him or her.

Play the next scene to the end of the 'Future' section –

Harold: *No John of course it won't. Personally I'd be sorry to see you go but for your sake I'd be delighted.*

Now we have finished all the Agenda points.

Ask how would participants structure the ending?

After discussion play the remainder of the video.

Use the Discussion Notes at the end of Option 3.

Option 3 (1 hour)

Play the video through then hold a discussion on the implications.

Points for promoting discussion

Should we interview at all? – Is the appraisal interview important?

Individuals need to know how they are doing now, what they can do to improve and to discuss how they can improve. Furthermore they value what their boss thinks of them.

How does the purpose depicted in the video match our organization's system?

To improve the subject's capacity to do his or her job by reviewing performance objectively, agreeing actions and objectives for the future and determining training and development needs.

What preparation should be done?

Give subjects plenty of notice to prepare themselves, check Job Description, last appraisal, points for discussion, delicate areas – strategy, sufficient time, no interruptions, place (see the checklist at Option 1).

The video makes the point that Harold picked first on John's good points – How important is this?

Praise if given precisely will let subjects know that their work is appreciated. If they do not feel threatened they will be more likely to discuss improvements. If the appraiser picks on the weak points first the subject may be defensive and less likely to reveal true information. General, unspecified praise is usually viewed cynically at best.

When should the form be filled in?

After or even during the interview. If the form is filled in first it will

indicate to the subject that the appraiser has already made up his or her mind. It also precludes the appraiser from changing the assessment if fresh information comes to light.

To what extent should future career prospects be discussed?

This depends very much on the organization's procedures but often the manager has very little direct influence. However the question must not be 'ducked' if the subordinate wants to discuss it. The manager may be the only link with the career development system.

What part should salary play in the interview?

As little as possible! If a salary increase is the outcome of the interview the subject will be preoccupied with this and will be evaluating the comments and discussion from this angle only. This means that the interview could become a negotiation with actions agreed on a 'trade-off' basis.

What should be done after the interview?

Fill the form in, let the subject see it and invite comments. Target and review dates should be noted and followed up, any training needs actioned.

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