



A SilkRoad TalentTalk eBook

# The Messy Link from Appraisal to Learning

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## IT IS EASY TO DRAW A DIAGRAM LINKING PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL TO DEVELOPMENT. IN PRACTICE, MANAGERS OFTEN DO A POOR JOB DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES. IS HR DOING SOMETHING WRONG?

It is hard to fault the idea that appraisal reveals an employee's abilities and a development plan should follow naturally from that. The smooth link looks good on paper. The reality is a good deal messier. It is not that HR is doing something wrong, just that the process is harder than it looks. Understanding why it is hard will lead to better results.

### The struggle between appraisal and development

Managers agree that it makes sense to sit down at least once a year with employees, tell them how they did and then move on to a discussion of how to do better. Alas, it is rarely so easy. Dr. Gary Latham tells the story of an investment banker who stormed out in fury after getting a bonus of almost a million dollars. Why the anger? Because his friends got over a million, the sub-7-figure sum felt like an insult. Crazy as that may be, it reminds us that appraisals are powder kegs of emotion. In a manufacturing firm, a sharp employee was given the top appraisal. Was she happy? No. She felt, given all she had done, that if the top score was 10, she should have been rated 11.

Those are stories of people getting good appraisals; I need not remind you what it is like when someone gets a bad one. If a manager thinks she is going to have a happy relaxed discussion of development after the emotional wringer of appraisal she is dreaming. Appraisal just does not fit with development. Many of the same facts are involved, yet the emotional tenor is completely different. They have to be separated as much as is practical.

Stergios Anastadiadas, a technical manager at Google, says they try to put some distance between appraisal and development by splitting the responsibility for doing them. For many jobs at Google, your peers' opinion of your work is more important than your manager's opinion. The peer assessment takes pressure off the manager who can focus on discussing how an employee can develop.

A different approach is espoused by Dr. Elliott Jaques, author of *The Requisite Organization*. He argues that the manager-once-removed (i.e., the manager's manager) has primary responsibility for mentoring and development. The manager can have the appraisal discussion, the manager-once-removed the development discussion; that's another means of separation.

A more common way to separate appraisal and development is to separate them in time. Managers chafe against this because it means twice as many performance management meetings, but it may be the only way to get the development discussion done properly. Luckily, as we look at some of the other messy aspects of the development discussion, we can find ways to make those discussions easier.

#### HOW TO SEPARATE APPRAISAL FROM DEVELOPMENT

- Separate them in time
- Separate them in space
- Do not have the same person do both appraisal and development

Finally, a separation in space can provide psychological distance between the appraisal and the development discussions. An office is the natural place for the appraisal discussion; a less formal setting such as a café or even going for a stroll can be conducive to a conversation about development.

### Sometimes the development discussion feels wrong

Sometimes the development discussion feels a bit ridiculous: imagine the 25-year-old manager giving development advice to a worker old enough to be his father. One HR leader's administrator had been in the same job for 16 years; what is he supposed to tell her about development? That discussion was nothing like the discussion he would have with a new employee. We make the development discussion harder than it need be by pretending that one-size fits all. HR should help segment the employee population, just like marketers segment the customer population, so that managers use an approach appropriate to that employee.

There are four main categories of employees when it comes to development:

- 1. The seasoned employee** – while everyone has skills they may want to develop, the seasoned employee has less need of a development discussion.
- 2. The up-and-coming employee who needs development** – this is the person we normally have in mind when we explain how the development discussion should work.
- 3. The problem employee** – this discussion has quite different dimensions from the employee who is doing well.
- 4. The pivotal employee** – if it is a high-potential employee or someone you cannot afford to lose, the development discussion takes on greater importance.

In the case of the seasoned employee, the manager should not be expected to come up with a development plan. The discussion ought to be a temperature check. The manager should ask “Are you still happy? Is there anything different you would like to do?” It is important to touch base, but there is no need to push it. Testing that everything is fine is all that is required and the manager can then devote time to other employees.

The up-and-coming employee is the one for whom the whole performance management cycle is principally designed for. Here a rich discussion of ambitions, strengths, weaknesses and interests is called for. HR should check to be sure managers are doing this well.

Another segment of employees are those where the performance issues are deep seated. Here assigning the employee a few development goals or sending them to a couple of workshops is a waste of time. For hard cases the manager needs to commit to working with the employee, maybe coaching them for thirty minutes a week for three or four months. It is an investment, but unless the manager is willing to fire them, it is exactly the kind of development plan that is needed. Managers may look ill when HR gives them this advice, claiming they are too busy to coach. And yes, they are busy, but the real reason may be their reluctance to spend that much time with an employee they consider mean or resistant. In these cases HR has to push: “Have you tried one-on-one coaching?” If they have tried and it failed then the employee does not need a development plan, they need to be let go. If the manager has not tried to get to the root of the performance problems then they owe it to the person and the company to at least make one serious attempt; they may be surprised at what is accomplished.

There is one last segment that HR should alert managers to: the pivotal case. High potentials and people you cannot afford to lose should not be treated the same way as other employees. HR should expect managers to spend extra time on the development plan for these pivotal employees. Most notably they should be having quarterly or evenly monthly discussions, not just once a year as part of the performance management cycle.

Standard development forms tend to promote one-size-fits-all thinking. We need to counter that with the messier idea that we can save time and be more effective by consciously segmenting the employee population and applying different approaches to each segment.

## Learning is more than training programs

Another way we can make development discussions more effective is by teaching managers that development is more than just sending people on a training course. An oil company found that the development section of the performance appraisal often just said “Needs to take a communications course.” This passed the ball to the training department who would dutifully put on a course, only to have the same requests appear next year. People were going through the motions, but not taking development seriously.

We need to give managers a better suite of development options than simply suggesting the employee take a course. There are many different ways skills can be developed (see sidebar). For example, executive coach Marshall Goldsmith recommends getting people to pick just one behavior they want to work on, and then get advice from their manager and peers on how they could improve, and finally, follow that up with feedback. To be more accurate Goldsmith suggests following up with ‘feed forward’ rather than ‘feedback.’

### THE MANY MEANS OF ASSISTING DEVELOPMENT

- Formal training
- eLearning
- Employee learns on their own once they are clear about the goals
- Manager provides coaching
- Employee is given more chances to practice a skill
- Pairing with a seasoned peer
- Mentoring by a senior manager
- External coaching
- Developmental assignments

Feed forward means getting input on what you can do better in the future versus listening to complaints or compliments about what you did in the past.

Another powerful learning mechanism is assigning challenging tasks where people can develop their skills. More simply, just providing more opportunity to practice can make a big difference. Sometimes employees need to be paired with a more seasoned peer to learn the ropes. Sometimes people do indeed need a workshop or training course. The lesson is to get managers to embrace the messiness of having to draw on a mix of learning interventions; not simply fill in a form and pass the ball to HR.

### **Can our talent management systems help?**

The good news is that talent management systems can take some of the pain out of appraisal and development. If a system is easy to use, and accessible by managers and employees, then they can spend more time on substantive discussion and less time on filling in forms. It can deliver the information they need, including ideas on different kinds of development tactics.

HR's role is not so much to run the performance appraisal and development cycle as it is to enable managers to do it well. Managers need training. They need to know it is a messy human process, not a smooth production line. They need to find a way to separate appraisal from development that works for them. They need to have a framework for treating different types of employees differently. They need a toolkit of development options and they need a talent management system that makes it easier.

HR has made life unnecessarily hard by taking a difficult process and making it look simple and linear; let's face up to how difficult the development discussion can be and put in the effort to support managers in doing it well.



## About SilkRoad

SilkRoad is a leading global provider of cloud-based social talent management software. Why simply manage talent when you can unleash it? The award-winning SilkRoad Life Suite is an integrated set of talent management products that power businesses with the latest Internet and social media innovations:

- OpenHire for recruiting
- WingSpan for performance management
- Point for social collaboration and content
- RedCarpet for onboarding and life events
- HeartBeat for HRMS
- GreenLight for learning management

The Life Suite is ideally suited for businesses of every size because of its unique and open “start anywhere” architecture: you can implement the complete suite or begin with one product and add functionality as you need it. Either way, it’s the fastest path to develop more productive and empowered employees who can rapidly boost business performance.