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## Focus

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# Supercharging Job Performance Appraisals

Most managers dread carrying out job performance appraisals of their subordinates, and the usual result is either no feedback or an appraisal that causes too much heartburn and yields too little benefit. This is a tragic situation because it's so simple to relieve the pain and get a lot more gain. As with most things in life, attitude is (almost) everything.

Envision a birthday party held in your honor. Gifts to you are part of the social protocol. Most people put careful thought into the present they bring you, and they usually enjoy your reaction to their offering as much as you appreciate the gift. So it's a happy occasion for both the giver and recipient.

Think of job performance feedback as a gift. It is, you know. Almost everyone wants to know how he or she measures up to both individual expectations and norms of behavior for the group. Answering a subordinate's "How am I doing?" question fulfills basic human needs, and demonstrates your concern for them. Things become remarkably easier once you get your arms around – and truly embrace – the "gift" concept. Moreover, appraisals can quickly become supercharged performance enhancers when you think of them within the gift framework. The three most important concepts for supercharged appraisals follow.

**1. Frequent feedback.** Give feedback often, at least some in semi-formal sessions where you and the subordinate address specific achievements and shortcomings. How often? Be flexible, because the answer is, "As often as the subordinate would find helpful." Also, regular feedback discussions help establish the boss as a partner in the subordinate's success. This transforms the atmosphere of appraisal sessions to more of a coaching session. With regular feedback, the performance review part of the annual (or semi-annual) appraisal then becomes mostly a summary of feedback already given.

**2. No grades.** Some of you may be unable to accept this heresy. I understand. As a degreed engineer who's worked within big companies, it was hard for me initially. But I have seen the transformative magic in this approach. Without grades, you eliminate *the* major stress factor in job appraisals, for both boss and subordinate. Emotionally, everyone wants to be a straight-A employee, and there's a letdown with anything short of that. No grades, no emotional letdown.

Also, no grade-inflation problems. Now you can concentrate on the really important stuff.

**3. Focus on achieving goals.** A laser-like focus on a few critical goals is the key to supercharging employee development. Don't equate the absence of grades with wimpy management or inattention to results. Quite the contrary! Leveraging strengths, identifying key goals and mileposts, and correcting critical shortcomings make this appraisal approach effective.

The admonition "You get out of something what you put in it" certainly applies in job

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performance appraisals. Periodic feedback, recording key events throughout the appraisal period, and monitoring and managing goal achievement are essential.

One final word about this no grading approach and salary administration: Use goal achievement performance to guide raises and bonuses. This is more transparent, more effective, and perceived by the employees to be fairer.

*Tom Wagner*

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identify the Right Questions  
and solve the Right Problems.

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