

It's time employees had more say in evaluating their supervisors

Reciprocal evaluation provides path to greater effectiveness

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In an interesting concluding session of an organizational-behavior workshop, the participants, all members of the Los Angeles workforce, engaged in a lively discussion about work-related issues. The most perplexing work-related behavioral violations came to the surface, and this, in a time when training sessions, workshops, online courses and traditional as well as non-traditional education are abundantly available.

One participant, we will name her Rebecca, described a situation in which her supervisor simply gave her a bad review, and surprised her on the day of the review by having all her personal items removed from her old cubicle to a distant one, placing another employee to work in hers. Rebecca was banished to the outer group because she was not marching in accordance with her supervisor's perspectives. The problem, according to Rebecca, was that she was regularly expected to train new employees while also fulfilling her regular tasks as normal.

When Rebecca went to the human-resource department to review what could be done about her abrupt relocation and bad review, she was advised simply to go ahead and work from the new cubicle until another position in a different department could be found for her. The HR representative told her not to let her bully-boss chase her away and to stay put, as her performance had not been unsatisfactory according to company standards. On Rebecca asking what measures would be taken against her supervisor's behavior, the HR representative mumbled vaguely, indicating that nothing would be done. Rebecca is currently applying for a new job, as she realizes that the situation will become increasingly unpleasant.

Another participant, Angie, recalled being denied a merit rise for two years in a row, simply on basis of her supervisor's personal perspectives. Angie explained that, while she was officially a production assistant, she was continuously expected to perform full-blown productions without supervision. However, she was not granted the promotion that would legitimize the real contents of her work. On the day of the meeting at which the request for a rise was considered, Angie's supervisor told her that he did not feel that she had performed well enough to justify a rise. Angie asked on what criteria the supervisor had come to this conclusion. He simply stated: "My own criteria!"

After this second let-down by her supervisor, Angie decided to voice her concerns to the human-resource department, where she was asked exactly when she learned that her request for a merit rise had been denied. She mentioned that this had happened on the day that she had met her supervisor to discuss the pre-submitted request. Because this was against company policies, as denials were supposed to be announced to the employees

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before the scheduled meeting with their supervisors, Angie ultimately received her rise, but not the promotion, which would make her actual job content official.

It took several months before the supervisor spoke to Angie again. He was extremely upset about her rise, and felt that she had gone against his supervisory authorities.

A third participant added her experiences to the heap. This lady, we will call her Francine, was faced with a supervisor who simply told her at the semi-annual performance-evaluation meeting that she, the supervisor, did not consider their relationship a good fit, and that she wanted to know what Francine was going to do about that. Francine explained to the group how shocked she had been when she had heard of this raw ordeal from her supervisor, because she had always maintained the idea that she was a model worker. After all, she was consistently performing beyond expectations, and undertook valuable, self-initiated and non-mandatory initiatives to help to measure the organization's performance in transitional activities.

Since these initiatives had been praised highly by the organization's top management on various occasions, Francine was mystified by the allegations from her supervisor, especially because she had always been willing to participate in all departmental activities and had repeatedly filled in for colleagues who were unable to meet their requirements. Moreover, there had never been any previous indication of the supervisor's dissatisfaction about Francine's performance – in fact, on the contrary.

Francine ultimately decided to resign. She realized, just like Rebecca, that working with a supervisor who was obviously not happy with her presence would only lead to a dreadful work experience. She agreed upon a stay for six more months, in which she financially prepared herself for the time after this job. Now, in hindsight, she attests that this situation was a blessing in disguise, as it forced her to devote her efforts and time sooner to the things she really wanted to do in life. She is now the owner of a growing entrepreneurial venture.

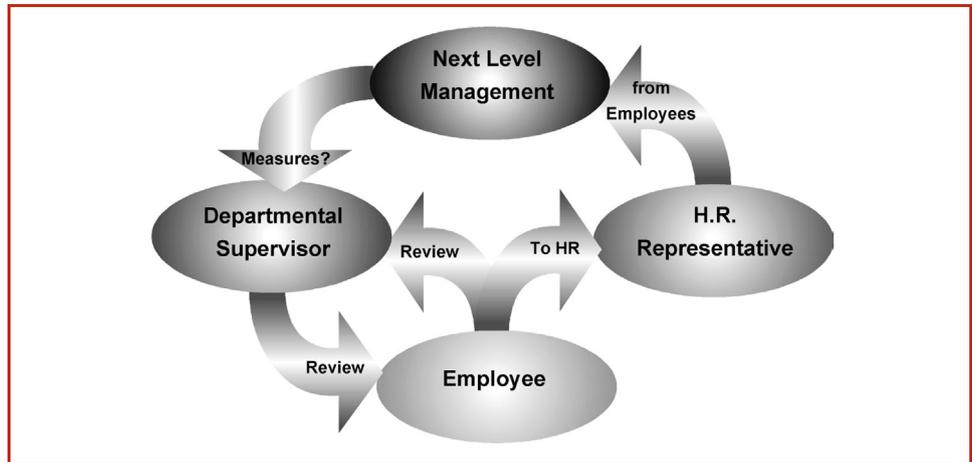
The common flaw and a possible solution

These examples have one thing in common: the upholding of departmental managers who seriously fail in their interactions with employees, but who remain in their positions because the human-resource systems of many organizations have no reciprocal evaluations. In most workplaces, employees still do not get the opportunity to evaluate their leaders, while the leaders often get away with very personal reasons for keeping employees underrated or even chasing them away.

While some workplaces claim to have initiated mechanisms for employees to evaluate their supervisors, these often fall short to a serious degree, either because employees have to place their names on their evaluations, which opens the door to severe bullying by the supervisor if they dare to provide a negative review, or because supervisors hand pick the employees that take part in the evaluations. Some workplaces install review and suggestion boxes but, according to the workshop participants, follow-up to the suggestions or reviews submitted remains limited or non-existent.

It does not require complex analysis to realize that, when employees are allowed to evaluate their supervisors, with a review of these evaluations by the next level of management, the performance of the supervisors toward their employees will improve. Figure 1 presents the reciprocal-evaluation cycle as it should be adopted in organizations that strive toward optimal performance and satisfaction of all members of their workforce.

Figure 1 Reciprocal-evaluation cycle



As Figure 1 demonstrates, departmental supervisors should, indeed, evaluate employees, but employees should also have a way to evaluate their supervisor's performance. The employees' reviews should be evaluated by the next level of management, overseeing the supervisor. A representative of HR could be instrumental in this process to prevent hostilities and indoctrination from supervisors toward employees in evaluation times. Upon reviewing the employees' input, next-level management should brief the departmental supervisor about his or her perceived performance and take measures toward improvement, if needed.

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As long as employees are left voiceless in the evaluation of their supervisors, situations like those described in this article will remain commonplace, and the percentage of dissatisfied people will remain high at the one location where most of us spend a third of our adult life: our place of employment.

About the author

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