

The Politics of Appraisal - Does Upward Feedback Offer an Objective View? An Empirical Study

Clive Fletcher

Goldsmiths' University Of London
Warwick Business School
Personnel Assessment Ltd

Acknowledgment: The author is grateful to Suki Moore for collecting the data reported here, and to both her and to Nina Parson for their help in analysing it.

Abstract

Multisource, multirater feedback, the process whereby a focal manager receives competency ratings from colleagues at all levels, is often advanced as a fairer, more objective approach to appraising people than traditional top-down appraisal. The latter has been often found to be influenced by non-performance, 'political' factors, such as the appraiser's desire to avoid confrontation or to 'look good' to others in the organisation. The study reported here sought to find whether similar political influences affected ratings given by subordinates to their bosses in an upward feedback scheme. A total of 170 staff rated their line managers (n=40) and also completed a Political Considerations in Appraisal Questionnaire. It was found that subordinates higher on political influences gave their boss more favourable ratings, and were more likely to say they would change the ratings they would give if those ratings were to be used for appraisal rather than for development purposes. The implications of these and other findings are discussed in relation to the use of upward feedback and its input to performance appraisal.

Introduction

The problems and limitations associated with conventional performance appraisal are well known and documented. The very fact that it is difficult to even get managers to complete their appraisal of staff is testimony in itself to their reluctance to

engage with the process. In one UK survey (Industrial Society, 1997) less than two-thirds of organisations reported a better than 67% appraisal completion rate - and this is one of the more favourable findings! One of the underlying issues is that most appraisal schemes reflect the needs and priorities of the organisation - they do not necessarily mirror the concerns and motives of the participants, the appraiser and the appraisee. Looking first at the appraiser, various studies have found that appraisers either see no consequences for them of conducting appraisals or just negative consequences (Napier & Latham, 1986). Indeed, there is a considerable amount of research that suggests the appraisal process is in a sense more focused on political issues than on assessing performance accurately. The most notable studies here were carried out by Longenecker and his colleagues (Longenecker, Gioia & Sims, 1987; Longenecker, 1989; Gioia and Longenecker, 1994). Amongst other things, this research identified the following reasons why managers inflated their ratings of subordinates -

- (1) believing that accurate ratings would have a damaging effect on subordinate motivation and performance
- (2) desire to improve the subordinate's chances of getting a pay rise
- (3) a wish to avoid others outside the department seeing evidence of internal problems and conflicts
- (4) preventing a permanent written record of poor performance coming into being which might have longer-term implications for the subordinate

- (5) need to protect subordinates whose performance had suffered from the effects of personal problems
- (6) wanting to reward subordinates who had put in a lot of effort even if the end result was not so good
- (7) avoiding confrontation and potential conflict with "difficult" subordinates
- (8) aiming to promote out of the department subordinates who were disliked or problem performers.

Though less frequently reported, some reasons for deliberately manipulating performance assessments in a downward direction were also uncovered -

- (9) scaring people into performing better
- (10) punishing difficult or non-compliant subordinates
- (11) encouraging unwanted subordinates to leave
- (12) minimizing the merit pay award(s)
- (13) complying with organisational restrictions on the number of higher ratings given.

The general observation from this research is that managers frequently allow their appraisal of staff to be influenced by 'political', ie non-performance, issues. Further support for this came from a review by Lefkowitz (2000), which showed that the appraiser's liking for a subordinate influenced the assessment made of them - and this was true even when the performance level of the subordinate was held constant.

Just as the appraiser can have a variety of motives in arriving at an assessment of a subordinate, the latter may also enter the appraisal process with a wide and mixed agenda (Fletcher, 2002):-

- (1) the appraisee may wish to know what their manager thinks of them, without necessarily committing themselves to accept it - in other words, their orientation may be chiefly protective and designed to maintain self esteem
- (2) following on from this, they may wish to present a counter point of view and seek to persuade their appraiser to accept their self evaluation, to either maintain present levels of reward or to enhance them; it is an impression management exercise
- (3) the appraisee may wish to use the appraisal as a springboard to development, getting their manager to support and arrange specific training and development steps for them
- (4) the appraisee may wish to solve job problems and to improve performance as a result
- (5) it may be important to use the appraisal as a vehicle for "upward management" and setting expectations, trying to persuade the appraiser to manage the appraisee in a different manner, or to modify the performance goals set
- (6) the appraisal can be an opportunity to express grievances against colleagues or to make the appraiser aware of personal issues and difficulties.

Thus, there are potentially personal motives and a political agenda on both sides of the table in traditional performance appraisal. The difficulties in achieving effective, accurate and objective appraisal have led many organisations to use upward or '360 degree' feedback as an

additional input to the appraisal process (Fletcher, 2001, 2008). This is typically seen as a way of arriving at a fairer assessment and one which, in particular, allows subordinates to offer their views and hence have a voice in the way they are managed. But does upward or multisource feedback overcome the problems of purely downward-looking appraisal? There is good reason to think that in terms of political motivations at least, it may not. Antonioni (1994) reports that managers prefer the feedback-givers to not be anonymous, whereas those giving the feedback prefer not to have their names given and when the ratings are not given anonymously they are higher than when they are! Similarly, London and Wohlers (1991) found that up to 24% of subordinates said they would rate their managers differently if feedback was not anonymous, and 34% said they would offer different assessments if the feedback was for appraisal rather than for developmental purposes. All of which suggests that a variety of influences may be present in upward feedback, and that it may not be an entirely objective source of performance appraisal. The rest of this paper will briefly describe a study done to investigate potential political influences on upward feedback.

The Study

This research was carried out in a large UK financial services organisation which was introducing a new upward feedback process, with staff completing a competency-based questionnaire on their immediate bosses. To assess what political influences might be affecting their ratings, a questionnaire was devised, based on a

20-item short form of Tziner et al's (1996) Questionnaire of Political Considerations in Performance Appraisal (QPCPA). The QPCPA has been shown to have very good internal reliability and convergent validity. Its items cover a wide range of ground in terms of influences on appraisal (around the issues identified by Longenecker, listed above), but factor analysis shows that they are all effectively measuring one unitary construct. The Tziner measure was devised for use with appraisers in the conventional appraisal setting. As the focus of the present study turned the tables and was concerned with the subordinates as raters of those above them, the wording of the questionnaire had to be changed to accommodate this, and a few items deleted. However, these modifications were actually quite minor. After subordinates had completed their upward feedback appraisal questionnaire, they were sent the Subordinate Political Questionnaire (SPQ). In both cases, they were completed anonymously, and linked by allocation of a code number rather than the subordinate's name. In all, 170 subordinates returned their completed SPQs; they had been rating 40 line managers.

As this article is intended to give an outline rather than a complete and detailed account of the study, the findings will be summarised here. The main ones were -

- (a) Scores on the SPQ correlated significantly ($r \geq .19$, $p < .01$) with the ratings given to managers ie subordinates who were more politically influenced gave their bosses more favourable ratings
- (b) The more uncomfortable with giving upward feedback a subordinate felt, the more favourable that feedback was likely to be ($t \geq .18$, $p < .05$)
- (c) Subordinates who believed there were 'in-groups' within the manager's team gave significantly more favourable upward feedback ($t \geq 2.2$, $p < .05$) and were higher on their SPQ scores ie more politically oriented ($t \geq 3.15$, $p < .05$)
- (d) Subordinates scoring higher on the SPQ were significantly more likely to say both that they would rate their manager differently if it was going to affect the manager's overall appraisal rating and pay, and that they would give different ratings if the feedback were not done anonymously.
- (e) Female subordinates rated their managers more favourably than did males ($t \geq 4.06$, $p < 0.05$) and scored lower on the SPQ ($t \geq 3.81$, $p < .001$)

These findings do not in themselves prove that higher ratings were given for political purposes, simply that there is an association between the favourability of the feedback given and non-performance related influences. It is perhaps significant, though, that subordinates who thought their boss had a favourite 'in-group' in the team gave higher ratings and were also higher in their political orientation. Perhaps they were projecting their own politically-tinged perspective on to their bosses and peers! The use of upward feedback data for appraisal rather than development clearly had implications for some subordinates - which fits with findings elsewhere that show greater leniency in ratings given when they are to

be fed into appraisal. The findings also confirm the likely impact of taking away anonymity of feedback. Finally, the fact that female subordinates in this study were less politically influenced is consistent with the finding that women are more open and in their self presentation generally (Fletcher, 1999).

Some Implications for Upward and 360 Degree Feedback

In terms of using these kinds of feedback processes generally, the more immediate and obvious lessons to be learned here are that better and more honest feedback is likely to be provided when it is sought within a developmental context, rather than as a direct contribution to a manager's performance appraisal. Likewise, the study confirms the importance of ensuring feedback givers remain protected by anonymity. The potential influence of political factors on feedback raises the question of how those giving feedback are chosen. In this organisation, they were nominated by the manager receiving the feedback. This may tend to enhance political effects, and a better strategy might be to have HR and/or the manager's own boss also nominate some of the feedback givers. Given that a sex difference was found in the favourability of the ratings given, and that such differences have been found before, it might be desirable to try to balance the number of males and females giving feedback, though of course this may not always be possible.

Can political influences be eradicated from feedback? Probably not. There is nothing to suggest that using full 360 feedback and hence multiplying the

sources of assessment will do anything other than multiply the sources of political influence, though the actual nature of the motivation might change across different rater groups (eg peers may be subject to a competitive bias that subordinates are not). Training those giving feedback in how to rate, and sensitizing them to sources of bias - in much the same way as is done for managers' appraisal training - is a possibility, but probably too expensive to implement. A further option is to use Behaviourally Anchored Rating Scales to enhance objectivity. Of course, both training and applying more sophisticated rating formats are used to improve conventional appraisal, and that is the point - namely that upward feedback is likely to be subject to all the biases of downward feedback, and the remedies are likely to be the same. This should come as no surprise, as it is already clear from previous research (Fletcher, Baldry and Cunningham-Snell, 1999) that multisource feedback questionnaires can show all the same psychometric failings (poor factor structure, lack of internal reliability, failure to correlate with external performance criteria) of conventional appraisal ratings. So, the overall message is clear - upward or 360 degree feedback is very like downward feedback, and is not necessarily reliable, consistent, objective or accurate.

Does this mean that there is no point in using upward feedback? Fortunately, it does not. Assessing performance is always going to have a degree of subjectivity, and if one relies on only one perspective, the danger of that is even greater. It is better to have a more rounded view, even if some

biases exist in each group of feedback givers. The evidence gives every reason to believe that multisource feedback can lead to positive and useful outcomes (Smither, London & Reilly, 2005) but only if it is used with great care. The main danger is not recognising that feedback processes of this kind are not as simple to use as some organisations appear to think. They need careful design, preparation of the parties involved, monitoring of their introduction and evaluation of their

outcomes. The feedback questionnaire should be well constructed (Fletcher, Baldry and Cunningham-Snell, 1999) and some of the steps mentioned above adopted to limit non-performance influences on ratings. Not least of these is the advisability of using upward feedback in a developmental context, at least initially, and only later - once it is established - giving it a role in performance appraisal.

REFERENCES

- Antonioni, D. (1994). The effects of feedback accountability on upward appraisal ratings. *Personnel Psychology*, 47, 349-356
- Fletcher, C., Baldry, C., & Cunningham-Snell, N. (1998) The psychometric properties of 360 degree feedback: An empirical study and a cautionary tale. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 6, 19-34.
- Fletcher, C. (1999) The implications of research on gender differences in self assessments and 360 degree appraisal. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 9, pp.39-46
- Fletcher, C. (2001) Performance appraisal and performance management: The developing research agenda. Invited (refereed) paper for the BPS Centenary Edition of *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 74, 473-487
- Fletcher, C. (2002) Appraisal - An Individual Psychological Analysis. In *The Psychological Management of Individual Performance: A Handbook in the Psychology of Management in Organisations*. Ed S. Sonnentag. Wiley.
- Fletcher, C. (2008) *Appraisal, Feedback and Development*. Routledge: London
- Gioia, D. A., & Longenecker, C. O. (1994). Delving into the dark side: The politics of executive appraisal. *Organizational Dynamics*, 22, pp.47-58.
- Industrial Society (1997) *Appraisal*. Report no.37. London: Industrial Society.
- Lefkowitz, J. (2000) The role of interpersonal affective regard in supervisory performance ratings: A literature review and proposed causal model. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 73, pp. 67-85.
- London, M., Wohlers, A.J. (1991). 'Agreement between subordinate and self-ratings in upward feedback', *Personnel Psychology*, 44, 2, 375-390.
- Longenecker, C. O. (1989) Truth or consequences: Politics and performance appraisals. *Business Horizons*, Nov/Dec, 1-7.
- Longenecker, C. O., Gioia, D., & Sims, H. P., Jr. (1987). Behind the mask: The politics of employee appraisal. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 1, 183-193.
- Napier, N. K., & Latham, G. P. (1986) Outcome expectancies of people who conduct performance appraisals. *Personnel Psychology*, 39, 827-837.

Smither, J. W., London, M., & Reilly, R. R. (2005) Does performance improve following multi-source feedback? A theoretical model, meta-analysis, and review of empirical findings. *Personnel Psychology*, 58, 33-66.

Tziner, A., Latham, G. P., Price, B. S., & Haccoun, R. (1996). Development and validation of a questionnaire for measuring perceived political considerations in performance appraisal. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 17, 179-190.