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The Performance Appraisal Paradox

Performance appraisal exists to help teachers improve instruction. The categories and domains of the performance appraisal instrument are based on extensive research and break the teaching act into useful, discrete components. School administrators observe staff frequently; give helpful, specific feedback; follow up on suggestions; provide additional assistance; and praise excellence. Teachers thrive on feedback, are motivated to improve, and experience satisfaction through professional growth. The appraisal system is taken seriously and is an integral part of staff development. This, at least, is the intent.

In practice, however, performance appraisal exists to document marginal teaching performance. Categories and domains are useful in identifying deficiencies. The school administrators observe staff infrequently, give perfunctory “pats on the back” to 90% of teachers, and have no time or opportunity to follow up on any suggestions for improvement. Schoolteachers receive little feedback, are anxious about performance appraisal ratings, and are relieved when the process is complete. The appraisal system is often subverted by cutting corners and has no link to staff development or professional growth.

The current performance appraisal system does little to help teachers improve.

Andy Armstrong was nervously anticipating his principal's third and final classroom observation of the year. Tall, slender, and bespectacled, Andy was in his late twenties. While the past six years teaching English at John Dewey High had greatly developed his confidence, performance appraisal time inspired a touch of uncertainty. He thought, *I wouldn't mind these visits if only they didn't happen so rarely. Three years of teaching with no one but students in here, and suddenly it's time for the administration to take a look again. Three visits—of just half a class period each!* He wasn't comfortable with the idea that his performance appraisal rating—a permanent part of his personnel file—was based on these three visits. Even his students acted differently when Dr. Cecilia Fusz, the principal, was in the room. Thankfully, Andy had received some advance notice of this last visit.

Not that Dr. Fusz wasn't a good administrator, Andy reflected. She had impressive credentials. As far as he knew, she was truly concerned about the quality of education at Dewey High. He was just not convinced that she understood the realities of front-line, day-to-day teaching—at least not in his department. With her math background, she sometimes seemed out of touch with the significant language problems of these urban students. He, as an English teacher, felt that he had a more accurate understanding of how to address the basics in the language arena.

Still, he hoped Sissy, as Dr. Fusz was known among the staff, would be pleased with what she saw. These performance appraisal observations were his only chance to get feedback on his teaching. Reassurances that he was on the right track were always welcome. Ideally, he'd hear mostly good things at the post-observation conference. It was too late in the year to hear any substantial criticism—too late for him to make changes, that is. Sissy hinted at his last two conferences that he might find it helpful to explore some new teaching strategies, use more variety in his approach. But he wasn't very clear on what that meant. Did she want him to de-emphasize grammar and spelling? Ask more questions? Get rid of worksheets? Would she be looking for something specific today?

Sissy always seemed to have some new idea about how things should be done. At faculty meetings, she often talked about things like creating more relevance for all students and teaching problem-solving skills. She liked the idea of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching. She wasn't completely off track, he conceded to himself. "Relate everything to students' experiences and involve them actively in class," she exhorted. Andy had nothing against any of that, at least not in theory. But the underlying message was that he needed

to raise student achievement, a euphemism for raising test scores, as if all teachers weren't trying their best to do just that. Besides, where was the time going to come from to plan interdisciplinary units? Just covering the basics was difficult enough. Being an English teacher usually meant putting in longer hours than most other teachers, given the lengthy writing assignments to grade. Any discretionary time during the day was spent at his desk, grading assignments and planning the next class sessions.

As he leafed through his lecture notes, he began to take stock. *No one can fault my preparation*, he reflected. *And I'm seeing some solid progress. In general, the quality of the written work seems to be improving, and a few of the kids are coming up with some really original ideas. But if I'm teaching so well, why do some of them seem bored and unmotivated? Even some of the best students seem tired and listless by the end of class.* He went back and forth, ruminating. How could he really know just how effective he was? Some days everything worked, but at other times Andy felt like his best-laid plans had somehow become unrecognizable. *Thank goodness the teachers here are friendly and supportive*, he thought. *But it would be great to know how I fit in.*

To Andy, most teachers appeared self-confident and completely in charge. *Nearly everyone complains about the difficulties of teaching, but no one seems to have self-doubt*, he thought. His student teaching days came to mind. *That was probably the last time I really got any input.* He felt a little nostalgic for that time in his life, remembering how motivated and excited he had been. True, he had been concerned about doing well. But the critique and follow-up he received had definitely built up his confidence. *It was invigorating and somehow nonthreatening, too. How times change*, he mused.

Andy found himself wondering how Joy, a colleague down the hall, would fare in her performance appraisal this year. A veteran English teacher, she had a stellar reputation throughout the department. She'd always been popular among the students, too. Andy was pleased to have her as a colleague. She'd helped him considerably when he first arrived at Dewey High. Even now, they often had lunch with the same group of teachers. He never trusted himself to ask her—or anyone else—for advice. He often wondered how other teachers would approach a particular topic or what ideas they might have about introducing a controversial book—not that he couldn't do it on his own. But sometimes he got the urge to do something differently and consult with a fellow professional about it. He had long

Student teaching: Last chance for real feedback for many teachers.

realized that he knew little about how other teachers managed their classrooms. That left him up in the air about how to assess his own abilities as a teacher. Try as he might to tune it out, the idea that he would be compared unfavorably with Joy was a persistent, unpleasant thought.

As time to begin class drew near, Andy couldn't quite shake the feeling that this was a test. Peering out the classroom door he spotted Sissy as she wove a purposeful path down the crowded hall. A large, attractive woman with a businesslike air, she was hard to overlook. He ducked back into the room. If his two most behaviorally challenged students would just relax and keep quiet, he'd be fine. He wondered what the other teachers did to capture their students' interest. On a good day, the rest of the students were more or less manageable. But as his rambunctious third-period students jostled their way through the door, he knew he would have his work cut out for him.

Meanwhile down the hall, Joy was relieved to begin her prep period. She pushed her thick auburn hair away from her face and removed her reading glasses. She was feeling uncharacteristically lethargic. She almost felt that she needed some additional support of some kind. *Is this what burnout feels like?* she wondered to herself. Feelings of discouragement and isolation had taken her by surprise this year. Sure, a lot of socializing went on at the high school during lunch and preparation periods. Most talk centered around the latest faculty meeting, new regs from the district, the new quality initiative, or personal news. But more and more she missed any real dialogue about what was actually happening—and not happening—in the classroom. She was no longer sure how effective her teaching was. Were other teachers feeling the same way?

Joy, with twenty years' teaching experience, was certainly no beginner. She took great pride in giving her best effort, in her reputation as an excellent teacher, and in her high performance appraisal ratings. In addition, she was an active member of the teacher social committee and was often the first to welcome new teachers to Dewey High. Under her wing, they learned the intricacies of supply room procedures and faculty politics and gained moral support along the way. This was strictly an informal effort on her part but one that provided much satisfaction.

Things, though, had definitely changed over the years. At urban high schools like Dewey High, teachers were doing more and, if test scores were to be believed, accomplishing less and less.

New unfamiliar challenges arose daily it seemed. Teaching now was certainly different from teaching at the beginning of her career. Broken families, poverty, mobility, and the rapidly changing world outside had conspired to make school seem irrelevant. And self-control had become more difficult for many of her students. In response, teachers were being asked to change the way they taught; to be sensitive to multicultural issues and different learning styles; to integrate technology and cooperative learning into their classrooms; to offer project-based, interdisciplinary curriculum in collaboration with other teachers; and, of course, to promote higher level thinking skills. The challenges felt overwhelming at times. She wondered how other teachers made all this happen in their classrooms.

Well, she thought, returning to the tasks at hand, I'd better focus if Sissy is going to observe me this afternoon. No point in raising red flags with the administration. She felt reasonably comfortable around Sissy, although, apart from the classroom observations and faculty meetings, she rarely saw her. Sissy had already observed her classroom teaching twice this past year and had seemed positive in her post-observation conferences.

Joy settled down as her fourth-period class entered the room. She enjoyed her students when they were ready to learn. But too often these days she felt as if she were just going through the motions. *Never mind, she thought as Sissy sat down in the back of the classroom, they are pretty good motions.* She knew she could expect perfunctory compliments from Sissy at the post-observation conference, and, except for the final conference in another month, the performance appraisal exercise would be over for the year. Joy wasn't sure what purpose the whole appraisal process served, but veteran teachers like her didn't take it all that seriously. Aside from a pat on the back, nothing had ever come of it—no salary raises, no promotions, not even any meaningful dialogue about the teaching process—just another distraction in an already stressful schedule. She faced the class, welcomed Sissy, and smiled.

Veteran teachers don't take today's performance appraisal processes seriously.

Later in the day, after the students had been dismissed and the teacher parking lot stood nearly empty, Sissy sighed. She wasn't looking forward to another afternoon of paperwork, with the race to meet the teacher evaluation deadline upon her once again. Final performance appraisal conferences with teachers would begin in

three weeks, and she hadn't started the written appraisal reports. Somehow the appraisal process seemed irrelevant. Budget projections, parental complaints, dropout rates, test scores, and a new district quality initiative were all much more urgent items on her docket. Those were the things most visible to her supervisors. The completed teacher appraisals were seldom reviewed by anyone. Sissy was not even sure that failure to comply with the performance appraisal system calendar would catch her superiors' attention.

Strategies to improve instruction and to raise student achievement were her real focus, all of which seemed rather removed from the performance appraisal system. As the instructional leader of the school, she was especially interested in reform agendas emphasizing such strategies as instruction across subject areas. She also considered it important to involve the students in defining and solving problems linked to their own experience. She had exhorted her staff time and again in faculty meetings to adopt newer, more interactive teaching methods and was in the process of planning workshops and inservice opportunities for the next school year.

The new ideas seemed to have evoked a foot-dragging response from most of Sissy's faculty, despite her efforts to convince them of the benefits of change. She'd never really received any direct feedback from her teachers about it, but her appraisal observations told her that not much was changing. Some of these teachers were just hopelessly stuck. She had a difficult time understanding their resistance. Perhaps she should simply mandate new assessment strategies or an interdisciplinary unit. *The performance appraisal process is really no help with any of this*, Sissy thought. The appraisal process provided little if any linkage with the professional development of her staff. No wonder it was May before appraisals received her full attention.

"What a time-consuming and thankless exercise," she groaned. "I already know which 95% of my teachers are competent and able. They know it, too. But beyond that, most teachers feel they need to receive a rating higher than 'satisfactory.'"

The fine differences between a proficient, an outstanding, and a satisfactory teacher were supposed to be observable behaviors. She read the descriptions of the behaviors once again. Under the domain "Delivery of Instruction," for example, a proficient teacher was described as one who "consistently and effectively gets students on task quickly and maintains a high level of student time on task throughout the lesson and during transition times." The satisfactory description read "Gets students on task quickly and maintains a

high level of student time on task throughout the lesson and during transition times.”

The whole process of official appraisal was largely a matter of determining which rating to assign each teacher. But how did she distinguish between teachers who got their students on task during the observation and teachers who did it consistently and effectively? After all, she only observed each teacher three times during the year. If a teacher had his or her students on task during each observation, was that consistent and effective or simply satisfactory? Somehow the objective observable behaviors seemed to require her subjective judgment. The appraisal had seven domains of teaching, each with many subcategories. And how useful was it to try to observe the nearly fifty different subcategories of behaviors under the seven domains? She knew she would be looking at the big picture for most ratings.

True, in the past five years, she'd had to place two less than competent teachers on plans of action—appraisal jargon for instituting procedures with teachers who were in dire need of substantial improvement. Steps necessary to assist such teachers, as well as consequences for failure to improve, were spelled out in detail by the performance appraisal system. This aspect of the appraisal system was actually helpful because it provided Sissy with a means to document deficiencies and enforce remedial procedures. Ironically, the appraisal system really seemed most useful when the performance of especially weak teachers was being assessed.

Sissy briefly considered giving every teacher a satisfactory rating. Much time and effort would be saved because she had to justify in writing any rating above satisfactory in each domain. Certainly there would be no negative professional consequences for the teachers. Every teacher with a satisfactory rating and above was treated the same by the school system. Only when ratings were less than satisfactory did the appraisal system prescribe a series of consequences. Many teachers would be upset, though, if their performance were considered merely satisfactory. She certainly didn't want performance appraisals to dampen morale in an already challenging school. *The teachers' union might have something to say about it too*, she reminded herself.

Getting to the task at hand, Sissy pulled Andy's folder and reviewed her notes of that day's observation. Andy was a very capable teacher who knew his curriculum well. The better students seemed to respect him, and his lectures were interesting and relevant. But Sissy did wish he had better classroom management skills. Maybe he should do a little less lecturing; his approach seemed so outdated.

Then there was the drill work (on parts of speech) that was downright tedious. She realized she had come to the same conclusion three years ago during his last appraisal. At that time, when she suggested a more interactive approach, he hinted that English was different from math, but he said he'd give it a try. With no opportunity to follow up on it, though, Sissy hesitated to mention it at all this time. So much for staff development! Of course, Andy was a clear asset to the school. He was the ninth-grade class sponsor and ran a drama club after school. But she did feel obligated to remind him to vary his teaching styles. Perhaps she could give him the second highest rating.

Traditional Performance Appraisal

- Is time-consuming
- Provides infrequent feedback
- May negatively affect morale
- Frequently causes anxiety
- Is useful only for teachers with serious weaknesses
- Has neither consequences nor rewards for competent teachers
- Does not provide for follow-up
- Cannot be objective
- Provides no link to staff development
- Is usually not an instrument of professional growth
- Is often not taken seriously by the administrator or the teacher

As Sissy pondered her options, her eyes fell on the notes she'd taken during Joy's classroom observation. Joy was one of those teachers who seemed to be respected by the entire faculty. Joy certainly had unique talents. She was a well-versed veteran and could practically teach in her sleep. She had great rapport with her students, was always well prepared, and stayed in touch with parents. Her work with novice teachers was a great asset, too. Sissy hesitated. Was it her imagination that Joy seemed to be less engaged this year? Joy appeared to be satisfied with simple answers, and her comments were a bit perfunctory. She had seen Joy teach differently during the last appraisal cycle, though, where Joy had facilitated some really exciting discussions. Had she caught Joy on the wrong day this time? If she mentioned it, would Joy be typical of so many teachers who felt demoralized if she offered suggestions for improvement? Did being an excellent teacher mean there was no room for further improvement?

Sissy frowned, feeling a little frustrated. Her classroom observations were so few and far between that she could only see enough to reassure herself that most teachers were reasonably capable. A few observations also sufficed to identify those who weren't doing well. And she could only really engage in follow-up activities with the most marginal of teachers. The business of writing up performance appraisals for good teachers seemed to be just an exercise in giving recognition for a job well done. Giving recognition was important, of course, but it was just a small part of staff development. Outside, she noticed the sounds of soccer practice fade away. Six o'clock! She realized she had been dwelling on the appraisal issue for far too long. Trying to mold performance appraisal into a vehicle for staff development simply wasn't going to work. As she quickly reached for her computer keyboard, she had only one thought: *Let's get this over with!*

The pace of the school year accelerated predictably as May gave way to June. Teacher performance appraisal conferences were sandwiched between finals, grading, special events, parties, and endless year-end paperwork. Most teachers and students had their sights set on the final day of school.

Sissy remained concerned about student achievement levels. The school district had indicated at various times during the past year that the newly developed state standards were going to have important consequences. Everyone was still unsure about what that meant, but no one doubted that standardized tests would remain the performance measure of choice.

More than that, though, Sissy wanted to produce better outcomes for students in ways that standardized tests didn't measure. Sissy thought that the students would benefit from a more integrated approach to a variety of subject areas. She wanted the students to be involved in issues that were important to them, issues that were connected to their lives outside of school. She also believed that the students would learn better from teachers who were learning and growing as professionals. So, after much thought, she mandated interdisciplinary units for the entire faculty. As a first step, each teacher was required to develop and teach at least one interdisciplinary unit the following year. Not ideal staff development, she was sure, but given the lack of time and resources it was the best she could do.

Administrators are as frustrated as teachers with current practices of performance appraisal.

Andy's conference had been conducted at the beginning of June. He was satisfied with his appraisal rating but was confused by the comments about his teaching style. Sissy probably just didn't realize the difficulties he faced, and she certainly knew little about teaching English. He already felt overworked. Even if he knew how to change, how would he know when he'd improved? Too bad she hadn't said something about it at the beginning of the year when he might have been able to work on it for her next observation. It was discouraging to discover that she found his efforts lacking. The new requirement for interdisciplinary teaching also worried him. What did it mean for him? Very little was said about any training or support for teachers. Then again, who could tell how, or even if, Sissy would follow up on it next year?

On the last day of teacher duty that school year, Andy packed up and checked out of school, visibly relieved that the year was over. He felt genuinely in need of time away from school to refuel his energy. Nonetheless, he hadn't lost his desire to teach. On the contrary, he resolved to work hard to improve the next year, even without knowing exactly how to go about it.

Joy was also in her own world as she left the building on the last day of school. She had had a reasonably good year and had been deemed exceptional (the equivalent of an *A* grade) in all of the major teaching domains of her appraisal. Yet, sad to say, she felt a little frustrated about being a teacher. She was certain something was missing. The principal had said only good things about her teaching at the final conference. Still, there hadn't been time for any reflection or discussion, so how could she really know how she was doing?

Even more worrisome, where had all the fun gone? She was sure she could manage an interdisciplinary unit. But she knew that many of her colleagues were concerned and felt unsupported. Morale was sagging at Dewey High at a time when the students needed more attention than ever.

Sissy was equally disheartened as summer vacation began. She felt that even though her faculty was as devoted a group of teachers as could be found anywhere, yet another year had come and gone without any tangible sign of change. *Just getting through the year is success enough in an urban school*, she thought. But the real heart of education was, of course, the classroom teacher, and helping teachers grow professionally seemed somehow beyond her abilities. She had no illusions about changing very much through her interdisciplinary mandate, but she felt she had to begin exercising instructional leadership in a visible way. Unfortunately, an adversarial tone to

faculty-administration relations was developing, and it threatened to dampen whatever progress they were making.

Joy, Andy, Sissy, and indeed the entire faculty had something in common as they began summer vacation—a desire to improve the quality of teaching at Dewey High. But, sadly, no one had the time or the means to do so. Although they had all survived another year, and despite sustained individual efforts and small victories here and there, joylessness reigned.