Let Them Eat Cake: An Innovative Project to Teach the Valuable Skill of Self-Performance Appraisal

Abstract

As performance management and performance reviews have matured, self-evaluations have become commonplace. As such, self-evaluation is an important skill, and with the right approach, it is a valuable exercise no matter what company you work for (Adams, T. 2019). Despite this, college student "evaluations" are still mired in the old "supervisor to employee" mode, which restricts students from developing one of their most important mastery skills - professional self-assessment. This interactive workshop will provide an experiential guide for helping students learn how to successfully perform self-assessments, and discuss the many, many benefits this projects brings to the professors and students.

Keywords: Self-Assessment; Experiential Learning; Professional Development; Skill Mastery

In the United States, Multisource Feedback (MSF) is the most widely used employee evaluation and development tool (Atwater, Waldman, Ostroff, Robie, & Johnson, 2005). The process of MSF - also known as multisource performance ratings (MSPRs) and 360 feedback - gathers and compares employee assessment ratings from multiple rater group observers including peers, subordinates, supervisors and, most importantly, self (Viswesvaran, Schmidt, & Ones, 2002). The results are used to determine significant corporate investments in training and development programs, promotions, and employee compensation for the targeted individual (Scullen, Mount, & Judge, 2003).

This makes the process of being able to prepare an honest, professional self-assessment a critically valuable skill for both the employee and the organization, because along with opportunities for increasing pay and stature, MSF is also the predominant leadership development tool. This development is based on the premise that rater groups differ in their perceptions of the employee's performance (Hoffman, Lance, Bynum, & Gentry, 2010), and therefore each group's perceptual differences contribute unique information to the overall assessment of the employee, creating a more well-rounded analysis of their strengths and opportunities for improvement. Thus, the rater group results when compared to the employee's own perception of performance highlights areas where agreements and disparities exist between groups about performance and behaviors, and therefore helps with employee self-improvement to further develop their leadership skills and abilities (Hooijberg & Choi, 2000).

As college educators, we tend to take the power position of being the arbiter of what grades our students' "earned". This often opens us up to challenges by students that grading is biased, "unfair", subjective, etc. These critiques are even more coarse if it is a project-based course, the professor runs the class like an organization with no rubrics or study guides or, horrors, there are no multiple choice tests.

There are multiple studies on how to remove professor bias from the grading process because if we are honest, we are human and we are biased. Some peer review articles address the pitfalls of grading based on things like halo bias (Malouff, Stein, Bothma, Coulter, & Emmerton, 2014), student's predictions of their grades versus their actual grades (Saenz, Geraci, Miller, & Tirso, 2017), and even the idea of mistreatment and justice in a cross university empirical study (Al-Hussain, 2008). This research was conducted because of poor student perceptions in Jordan

about the behavior of some teaching staff and the occurrence of different forms of student mistreatment and student mistrust of the grading system in the Jordan University of Science and Technology (JUST). In short, students and their concerns about grading also appear to be a multi-cultural issue, thus increasing the importance of studying this all important process at the university level and for future professional performance success.

Perhaps the most concise description about the overall failure of our current grading system came from *The Quad Magazine, December 12, 2019.*

> *...the reality is, our five-letter grading system isn't necessarily that informative, it generally isn't very effective, and it certainly isn't educational. Bad grades can stigmatize and discourage those who need help. Good grades tend to reward and elevate those who already have all the intellectual and cognitive advantages. And ultimately, grades are a gross oversimplification of what students are capable of learning and doing...The grading system is inherently subjective. It's inherently punitive. And it's inherently reductive (The Quad Magazine, 2019).*

However, *Inside Higher Ed* published the fall-out from a professor at who tried to offer a self-grading system to their students. This highly publicized case was fraught with internal problems and drew the ire of enough outsiders that the school demanded the syllabus outlining the program be taken off the school website. The university's response was swift: "A recent online report published a syllabus that a Terry College of Business professor had placed on his website," Benjamin C. Ayers, dean of the Terry College of Business, said in a statement to *Inside Higher Ed*. "The syllabus stated that his grading policy would allow students inappropriate input into the assignment of their own grades. I want you to know that the syllabus did not conform

with the university's rigorous expectations and policy regarding academic standards for grading" (Roll, 2017). The official university comment brings up interesting, and arguable, points on its own - are the subjective and biased ways teachers grade (as cited above) really part of a "university's rigorous expectations and policy regarding academic standards for grading", or just merely part of an archaic system that has not progressed with current professional workplace practices for measuring performance?

This begs the question of how to move students from a stringent, passive system where they are assigned a grade by a "supervisor" to transitioning into the professional world of self-assessment for promotion, financial gain, and improvement. In the professional case, students might still have complaints about their rating systems, but they also have their self-prepared performance evaluation that elaborates on their work and accomplishments. Perhaps even more importantly, this document is done knowing that it is based on how they performed their job, and equally, or even more strongly based, on how they compare to their peers.

Thus, if we want to prepare students for their professional lives, helping them learn how to prepare and complete this critical, annual (or more frequent) self-assessment is imperative.

Take Aways

This workshop will focus on avoiding the problems the Terry School encountered by discussing:

1. The purposes of student's grading themselves to build a professional skill
2. How instructors can weave the idea of end of semester performance appraisals into each project as it is assigned by agreeing what levels of competence are expected each time

3. Allowing the students to generate a list of professional behaviors they expect from co-workers

4. Emphasizing the importance of extra-role behaviors, which have been found to weigh heavily on appraisals

5. Encouraging the workshop participants to perform on their own end of class performance appraisal, as assigned by the facilitator ☺, and then debriefing.

The end result will be a complete guide for the instructors to go back and implement their own end of semester student self-grading performance evaluation that will put the emphasis of quality of performance, extra-role behaviors, and peer comparison squarely in the student's arena, thereby nearly eliminating teacher bias, complaints about grading practices, and providing yet one more mastery skill to the student's professional portfolio.

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