

# The Role of the Appraisal Interview in Learning Needs Analysis

Written by Administrator

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The appraisal interview plays an important role in providing the manager and the organisation an understanding of an individual's learning needs. In this article Sarah Cook looks at how this method can be used to create better awareness of learning needs.

## The appraisal process

It is best practice for managers to hold a performance review meeting once every six months with each of their direct reports. In reality many managers confine this meeting to a yearly discussion, if at all. Some see the review process as a form-filling exercise, which, once done and dusted, is not referred to again until the following year.

An appraisal should be the formal element of an on-going and active performance management process.

The process begins with the manager jointly setting objectives with the individual. This also provides an opportunity to set expectations for the coming months both of the behaviours required of the individual as well as the standards to which they need to work. In addition many managers use the opportunity to agree ground rules for how they and the direct report as well as the team, want to work together.

Development planning forms an important part of the performance management cycle. Best practice is for each individual to have a personal development plan so that they can see in detail the development that they have agreed will provide them more competence and confidence in their role.

Throughout the performance management cycle, managers monitor the individual's performance to make sure they are on track. Feedback and coaching should be an on-going process, which is why it is in the middle of the cycle.

The fourth stage of the circle is Performance Review or Appraisal. There should be no surprises here because this is a formal agreement on the discussions that should have been taking place between the manager and the direct report throughout the performance management cycle.

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## The appraisal interview

The main focus of the appraisal meeting should be on the individual - they should have at least sixty per cent of the airtime. It is the individual's review, and so it needs to be useful to them as well as the manager and the organisation.

Often the focus of the appraisal is on form filling, but an effective appraisal relies on a quality discussion, not forms. Irrespective of what process each organisation's appraisal system takes, generally half the review discussion should centre around past performance and half around the future.

When looking back at performance, typically the manager will pose questions such as

- What has gone well?
- What challenges have you faced?
- What could you have done differently?

Looking forward, the reviewer typically focuses their questions on:

- What new objectives and targets do we both agree need to be set?
- How can we improve things for the individual and the organisation going forward?
- How can we help to develop the individual's skills and talents?

In summary, the appraisal interview should offer the individual an inclusive, two way review of performance using clear objectives. It should also act as an opportunity for an in depth discussion about training and development needs

It also enables members of staff to provide upward feedback to their line manager. Just with the feedback the manager gives their member of staff, this should not be a surprise. As the appraisal interview is not a one sided opportunity for the manager to lecture the employee, it is also not a one sided opportunity for the employee to have a moan about everything 'under the

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## The link to competencies

If the organisation has a set of competencies for managers and members of staff, the appraisal interview provides a useful opportunity to review how well the individual is meeting these. Competencies are the skills, knowledge and behaviours expected of employees in each area and in each level of the business. Competencies can be linked to role or profession. In addition many organisations have core management competencies that outline the skills, knowledge and behaviours of the management population.

## Example of Communication Management Core Competency

- Is open and approachable when interacting with others
- Provides relevant and timely information
- Considers the communication needs of their audience; uses appropriate methods to communicate
- Uses straightforward, everyday language
- Encourages and asks for questions
- Listens to people without interrupting
- Checks for understanding; asks for feedback

In my experience, reviewing whether people's level of competencies meets the required standards as well as reviewing overall performance, helps create a culture which encourages learning and development. As when reviewing objectives, both the manager and the direct report need to provide examples of the levels reached. Where there are shortfalls, this provides both parties with the opportunity to talk about and agree future development needs. If the employee wishes to progress their career, a discussion can also take place around the competencies required in future roles and how these can be developed.

## Personal development plans

Whether reviewing competencies, objectives, achievements or disappointments, the appraisal interview should provide objective information from which to develop a personal development plan [PDP]. This encourages the individual, once an area for improvement has been identified, to do something about it. The PDP should be developed and agreed between the line-manager and the member of staff being reviewed.

Personal development planning is a vital component of the appraisal process. Yet, in practice,

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many managers do not place emphasis on this as part of the performance review. Rather than an annual exercise, it should be a continuous process that ensures that learning and development needs are identified as they arise.

After completing the appraisal meeting, individuals should then be able to formulate their personal development plan. To do this, they need to:

- identify their learning and development needs for the coming six months to a year
- then prioritise these requirements and attach a time-scale to the needs
- consider the best ways and methods for meeting the needs identified
- identify the desired 'outcomes' i.e. what they would like to get out of the development activity. (This will help the individual assess the success of the activity when it has been completed.)

Best practice is to focus on the development of a limited number of new behaviours, skills or knowledge. This is because effective and measurable improvements are most likely to be achieved on a restricted range of areas. A plan that includes a large number of improvement areas is likely to be unrealistic.

Typically a PDP will outline the details of the learning and development needed, the desired outcomes and the date by when the individual wishes to complete the development. Again, as with the appraisal process, the actual format of the PDP form will vary from organization to organization. It is the fact of having a PDP rather than what the form looks like that counts!

### Example of Personal Development Plan

Details of Learning and Development Required	Desired outcomes of the development	Desired date of completion of development activity.
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Creating a culture where development is not just training courses.

Part of the challenge of the manager in helping individuals to identify learning and development opportunities is creating an understanding that learning is not just restricted to training courses. For example development may take place on-the-job as well as by attending a training course.

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There are a range of learning and development options open to individuals - self-study, e-learning, seminars, conferences and workshops, coaching and mentoring to name but a few. All of which, according to the need may support them in acquiring new skills and knowledge, changing behaviours and keeping abreast of developments in their areas of work. A team away-day or team development day may offer opportunities for enhancing team work and better understanding across the group for example.

Where an organization has a competency framework and this has formed part of the review process, the manager can help the direct report to identify which competency areas can be developed. It is often useful to indicate the development opportunities that exist to address these needs.

Within certain roles and professions, continuous professional development is integral in supporting the learning and development of all individuals. Professional development is offered by higher education institutions or professional bodies such as CIPD, CIMA, ACCA, CIPFA, AAT etc.

The key for the manager in guiding the Personal Development discussion with their direct report is to help them best understand their learning style preferences. Then to facilitate a discussion on what are the best methods to address the learning and development need. Part of the conversation should also focus on what support the manager can provide the individual in achieving their development goals.

### **Collating information**

The appraisal process given that it includes the production of Personal Development Plans, provides the organisation with a useful means of collating information on development needs across the business. One organisation I worked with in the health sector for example, allocated time in the calendar for all managers to complete the performance reviews and so that members of staff had time to fill in a personal development plan. Each section / departmental / unit manager then collated individual's Personal Development Plans and produced a template, like the one below, to provide a summary of the requirements.

### **Learning and development needs analysis template**

Manager Name Department/Section Date  
Name of member of staff Learning and development need  
Desired outcome of the development

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How will the need identified be achieved?

Desired completion date if known

The template was then sent to the Learning and Development department. The department transferred the information onto a master spread sheet so that they could log the learning and development requirements of the whole organisation. This allowed them to plan their learning calendar and to arrange interventions which met the specific needs of individuals within each department. It also enabled them to be clear with departmental heads about which learning and development options would need to be self sourced and funded.

### **Providing learning and development interventions that meet the need**

In practice many organisations do not encourage the development of PDPs, neither are some of them effective at collecting information from the appraisal interview. To overcome this barrier, some businesses are turning to the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS). These offer IT support to line managers and HR professionals so that they can record the outcomes of appraisal interviews and personal development planning discussions straight on-line. With some systems the HR professional can then access this information to allow them to view and amalgamate requirements.

However the information is gathered, the key is to provide learning and development opportunities that are fit for purpose. For example if a business uses a competency framework, best practice is to provide learning and development opportunities that match each competency family.

### **Key Learning Points**

- The appraisal interview, when properly conducted, provides an invaluable method for identifying learning and development needs
- An appraisal should be the formal element of an on-going and active performance management process.
- The appraisal interview should offer the individual an inclusive, two way review of performance using clear objectives.
- It should also act as an opportunity for an in depth discussion about learning and development needs and allow individuals to develop a personal development plan [PDP].
- The PDP should encompass a variety of learning methods. It should not just be restricted to training courses.
- Line managers and HR professionals can use information from PDPs and appraisal interviews to provide an overview of organizational learning and development needs.

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Sarah Cook is Managing Director of the leadership and service excellence consultancy, The Stairway Consultancy.

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