



Performance appraisal systems: The need to focus on employee engagement

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Abstract

Of the numerous functions of human resource management, performance appraisal (PA) is considered to play a critical role in the success of the organisation because its outcomes show the success of the realisation of other human resource functions. But, with the changes in a working context where winning the hearts and minds of employees is of paramount importance, there is a need for improved engagement of employees in the appraisal process. This study aims to ascertain whether the current appraisal process engages the employee fully. The study was conducted by two organisations in Dar es Salaam. The total sample size consisted of 50 subordinates. Interviews with key informants and questionnaires were used to collect data. Descriptive analysis was used to analyse the data with the use of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 16. Results indicate that the PA tool does not fully engage employees; the focus is more on the gap between expected performance and actual performance than on employee engagement and coaching, which are fundamental in winning the hearts and minds of employees.

Keywords: Appraisal, employee engagement, performance;

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1. Introduction

Human resources are arguably the most valuable assets of any organisation and constitute the largest corporate investment (Roslender et al., 2009). Of the many functions of human resource management, performance appraisal (PA) is considered to play a critical role in the success of the organisation because its outcomes indicate the success of the realisation of other areas in the field of human resources (recruitment, selection, placement, adaptation, training of the employees, motivation and other personnel activities). Kondrasuk (2012) defines a PA system as a system that combines the following elements: the definition of the employee's professional objectives and expectations; the actual performance of the employee; the appraisal of that performance; the feedback of the PA, including an indication of how it may be improved in the future; and, finally, the definition of professional objectives and expectations for a new appraisal period.

Armstrong (1996) describes the role of the PA as a tool for looking forward to what needs to be done by people in the organisation to achieve the purpose of the job and meet new challenges. PA provides a good opportunity to formally recognise employees' achievements and contributions to the organisation and to ensure that a clear link is established and maintained between performance and reward. Thus, one of the key objectives of PA is to reward performance and address weaknesses. Other authors agree that there are many decisions in modern organisations that depend on PAs, and they are widely used in most organisations (Davis, 2001; DeNisi, 1996; Wanguri, 1995). They are an important piece of the process by which organisations attempt to direct themselves (Kreitner, 1998), and they have been considered a key component in the success of organisations for most of the 20th century (Grote, 2002; Rasch, 2004; Starcher, 1996).

Nonetheless, within the context of technology and the rapidly changing environment, particularly work culture, PAs are gradually becoming debatable. PA processes present numerous difficulties and obstacles (DeNisi & Peters, 1996; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996) and it is safe to say that managers and workers are generally not very satisfied with them (Coens & Jenkins, 2000). For instance, in their article, Van Dijk and Schodl (2015) conclude that raters' judgement biases and lack of accuracy in the ratings threaten the PA validity. Furthermore, the organisational conditions, which often limit opportunities to observe all workers sufficiently, threaten procedural justice. The process seems to be largely future-focused rather than fuelling on future performance and engaging the employee. Maroney and Buckley (1992) report that there is a considerable gap between theory and practice and that human resources' specialists do not make full use of the psychometric tools available.

The complexity in giving and receiving feedback also calls for alternative interventions to feedback that focus on identifying conditions for success (Kluger & Van Dijk, 2010). Besides, leadership biases, such as preferring in-group members, are also a possible threat to this process (Van Dijk & Schodl, 2015). Another argument maintained by line managers is that the process needs to be simple and easy to use, otherwise it becomes time-consuming and cost-ineffective (Longenecker & Nykodym, 1996). Benefits and rewards of PA appear to be often overstated suggesting that a typical PA system consumes staggering amounts of time and energy, depresses and demotivates people, destroys trust and teamwork, and, adding insult to injury, delivers little demonstrable value at great cost.

According to the Global Performance Management Survey (2013), only 3% of companies reported that their overall performance management systems deliver exceptional values. The study shows that traditional PA practiced in the majority of organisations today is flawed, does not improve performance and may cause a decline in performance. The study suggests intensive collaboration, professional development, coaching and empowering people to do great things. The largest professional

services networks in the world, like Deloitte, Adobe and Accenture, have recently decided to revamp their performance review cycle for a process with a special focus on fuelling performance in the future rather than evaluating the past. Undeniably, this process aims to leave employees feeling motivated to raise their performance and engagement in today's hyper-competitive, fast-changing business environment.

In Tanzania, the Open Performance Review and Appraisal System (OPRAS) was introduced in all ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs), regional secretariats and local government authorities (LGAs) to enable proper and more effective use of human resources. This is backed up by policies and laws, which enforce, inter alia, OPRAS implementation in the public service. These are the Public Service Employment Policy (1999), the Public Service Act (No. 8 of 2002) and the Public Service Regulations (2003) with their amendments.

1.1. Related studies

The introduction of OPRAS led to the abolition of the confidential appraisal system. OPRAS is a system that requires every public servant to sign an individual performance agreement with his/her immediate supervisor that sets performance targets for the year. The performance agreement contains objectives, targets, performance criteria and resources required for implementing the performance agreement. The agreement is the basis for staff PA. The performance agreement derives its annual targets from the annual plan and budget. This link cascades down the implementation of a plan to individual staff and thus enhances individual accountability (Issa, 2010). Nonetheless, the extent to which employees are engaged in objective setting and adequate two-way communication is debatable. Practice indicates that employees fill out OPRAS forms to fulfil government demands rather than the tool being used to motivate employees to higher heights.

Ultimately, communication is largely one way where the supervisor describes how well the employee met or failed to meet set performance standards. A platform for feedback discussion is limited by leniency by some supervisors, as well as the inability of some supervisors to provide relevant coaching and advice. As a result, where feedback is tied to employees' pay and other benefits, like promotion, it consequently impairs an individual's opportunity for advancement, thereby demoralising the individual. Most studies on PA concentrate on its effectiveness (Long et al., 2013), implementation process in the local authorities (Lalika, 2015) and perception regarding its benefits (Matimbwa & Mwasimba, 2019). Many of these findings, like that of Long et al. (2013), indicate that PA is related to a dynamic relationship between employee satisfaction and perception of fairness, proving that there have been mixed outcomes of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the tool. To heighten satisfaction with the PA system, these authors are of the view that the system should be more engaging to reduce some of its shortcomings. So, this study sought to focus on employee engagement in the process of implementing PA.

The success of any organisation depends on the quality and commitment of its employees, who are indeed the most valuable organisational resources. To ensure continuous effectiveness and efficiency in organisations, it is imperative to persistently evaluate employee performance to inform administrative decisions such as the need for re-training, promotion, compensation, demotion and others. To achieve these ends, the appraisal tool needs to be viable, ensuring it satisfies and promotes motivation and learning to employees, as well as helps the organisation achieve organisational objectives. However, the current appraisal system seems to have shortcomings, particularly inadequate engagement and bias (Van Dijk & Schodl, 2015). For instance, a study by Itika (2007) shows that OPRAS

as a tool for appraising performance was criticised for failing to match employees' expectations and therefore proposes an alternative model to serve the purpose. Kondrasuk (2011) also considers PA to be an unnecessarily bureaucratic practice that can damage the relationship between employees and managers. These shortcomings are likely to demotivate employees, leading to the inadequate achievement of organisational objectives. Owing to these shortcomings and changes in the work culture where employee engagement is imperative to win the minds and hearts of employees to achieve organisational objectives and the fact that most of the studies (Lalika, 2015; Matimbwa & Mwasimba, 2019) inadequately concentrated on employee engagement particularly in the context of Tanzania, this study focused on employee engagement.

1.2. Purpose of the study

Several studies on the importance of engaging employees in the process that were conducted elsewhere indicate that engagement makes them feel respected, appreciated and perceived fairness in the process. Therefore, this study sought to focus on whether the current PA system engages employees. Particularly, this study intended to respond to the following question: Does the PA in place motivate employees to achieve organisational objectives with enthusiasm? The study also collected information intending to improve the current PA system in Tanzania with particular focus on employee engagement.

2. Materials and methods

The study adopted a cross-sectional study where data were collected and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted by two organisations in Dar es Salaam, namely Tanzania Commission for Aids (TACAIDS) and Kinondoni Municipality. The reason for the selection of the study area was based on the fact that these organisations have implemented OPRAS for a long time since 2005. The purposively random sampling technique was employed to obtain 5-line managers and 25 subordinates from each organisation, forming a total of 60 respondents.

2.2. Data collection instruments

To gain a better insight on whether PA in use stimulates employees to achieve organisational objectives with enthusiasm, interviews were conducted with purposely selected 10-line managers from Kinondoni Municipality and TACAIDS. Quantitative data regarding the skills of line managers to engage employees and problematic areas in the current appraisal system were gathered through questionnaires. Desk review was also conducted by consulting various documents on the introduction and implementation of OPRAS at Kinondoni Municipality and TACAIDS.

2.3. Data analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data whereby the phrases of responses were aligned under respective predetermined themes. Quantitative data were analysed through descriptive statistics using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences whereby frequencies and percentages of responses were generated. Consequently, the information obtained from the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data analysis was triangulated and used to answer the research questions. The study

adhered to all ethical requirements including a permit letter for data collection from the employer and confidentiality of respondents

3. Results

3.1. Work experience of the respondents

It was found that by the time of conducting this study, 37 (74%) respondents had worked for the studied organisations for the period between 0 and 5 years. This is followed closely by 11–15 years (14%) and a few who have worked above 15 years (Table 1). At the same time, all employees filled out the PA forms as it is mandatory for all MDAs and LGAs to introduce OPRAS and make it operational. Respondents indicated that they usually set objectives at the beginning of the year, review at mid-year and evaluation is conducted at the end of the year. According to them, the results of the OPRAS determines their promotion and other benefits.

Table 1. Number of years the respondents had worked for respective organisations

S/N	Years of work	Frequency	Percent
1.	0–5	37	74
2.	6–10	5	10
3.	11–15	7	14
4.	20+	1	2
Total		50	100

3.2. Line managers' skills in engaging subordinates

For PA to be effective and efficient, it requires inter alia, managerial adequate skills. A common deficiency in appraisal systems is that the evaluators seldom receive training on how to conduct effective evaluations. Unless everyone evaluating performance receives training in the art of giving and receiving feedback, the process can lead to uncertainty and conflict. As such, respondents were asked to rate their immediate supervisors' skills in implementing the PA (OPRAS) process. Generally, respondents posited that immediate supervisors were practically responsible for appraising their subordinates but were surprisingly not adequately skilled in operationalising the activity (Table 2). For instance, managers are marginally skilled in providing career development and coaching employees (70%). Similarly, respondents indicated that their supervisors have moderate skills (90%) for conducting candid dialogue with employees. As indicated elsewhere open dialogue with employees is fundamental in making employees perceive fairness and satisfaction with the process, thereby motivating them. Additionally, this study showed supervisors' marginal skills (54%) in linking individual performance to organisational performance. Several authors (Heinrich, 2007; Law, 2007; Songstad et al., 2012) contend that PA provides an avenue for managers and employees to have a discussion on carrier development and opportunity for coaching employees.

PA may not achieve this goal particularly when line managers are inadequately skilled. As individual performance is critical to organisational performance, it is useless if inadequately linked to organisational performance. Interestingly, the outcome of PA is administrative decisions, particularly compensation for performance which ultimately motivates employees. If the process becomes ineffective, it is likely to lead managers to make inappropriate decisions, thereby leaving the employee feeling demotivated and devalued. It has been commented that compensation for performance is generally ineffective when tasks are complex or require collaboration. Likewise, employees may dislike the PA process if they know their appraiser will only criticise them instead of mentoring and coaching

them in a participatory manner. With regard to this study's findings, the inadequate skills on the part of line managers who are indeed the appraisers of employees suffice to say that the practice of the PA system narrowly makes employees work with enthusiasm. With the change in work culture, there is a need for a better system that engages the employees in determining future improvement calling for two-way communications which need managers with adequate skills for coaching and engaging employees to enhance enthusiasm, thereby leading to better future performance.

Table 2. Line managers' skills in engaging subordinates

Managers' skill	Highly skilled	Moderately skilled	Marginally skilled
Setting SMART goals	10 (20%)	18 (36%)	22 (44%)
Gathering information on employee's performance	8 (16%)	20 (40%)	22 (44%)
Linking individual performance to organisational performance	10 (20%)	13 (26%)	27 (54%)
Having candid dialogue with employees	4 (8%)	45 (90%)	1 (2%)
Provide career development, coaching and direct employees	4 (8%)	11 (22%)	35 (70%)

3.3. Role of the supervisors in the evaluation process

The study further intended to find out the major role of supervisors as appraisers in the evaluation process. Interviews from line managers revealed that out of the various roles, like coaching, empowering employees, professional development, judging, counselling and setting objectives, judging is practically their fundamental role. As such, line managers are likely to pay more attention to past mistakes than to future successes because managers are trained to focus their attention on the gaps between performance expectations and actual performance. This approach siphons attention away from improving future performance – the very goal the system tries to achieve. Adequate time for counselling and judging was also reported to be a challenge for appraisers. This point is cemented by the study of Grote (2002), who argues that it is very difficult for the supervisor to concurrently counsel/guide while trying to be a judge at the same time. Evaluators may feel they are placed in conflicting roles by having to be both a coach and a judge of subordinate performance.

Likewise, a good number of line managers were of the view that there is a need to focus on coaching, empowering employees and professional development to win the hearts and minds of employees. In a bid to enhance employee morale organisations need to focus on hearing what employees think and feel about their work and then align with responsibilities they will enjoy. Nonetheless, voluminous human resource strategies rely on the appraisal as the fundamental tool to develop compensation, development, leadership potential and every other activity in a person's career. In fact, due to its unnecessarily past-oriented nature, it becomes onerous and shifts away from coaching and development. The PA process can also be a bitter process which can create emotional pressures and stress and sometimes can adversely affect morale and lead to demotivation. It is imperative therefore to revamp the appraisal tool making it more engaging.

3.4. PA and employee engagement

This part is intended to ascertain whether or not the PA system in place motivates employees to work with enthusiasm given its problematic areas, as shown in Table 3. Literature indicates that PA systems, if well carried out, should be able to make employees work with enthusiasm by winning their

hearts and minds (Pichler, 2012; Prasad, 2015; Singh & Rana, 2014). Wellins et al. (2006) defines engagement as the extent to which people enjoy and believe in what they do and feel valued for doing it.

Engaged employees are not only motivated to work but they also know exactly what to do and how to do it more effectively because they know the strategy and company objectives and share them. Mone and London (2018) assert that if performance management systems are designed to promote employee engagement, it may lead to higher levels of performance. Similarly, Gruman and Saks (2011) argued that it is important to promote employee engagement as a driver to increase performance to enhance performance management systems. Thus, to enhance engagement, employees need to perceive those appraisals and feedback are provided in a fair manner.

The results of this study reveal that PA may not be a panacea to assessing employee performance and assisting managers in making administrative decisions, particularly those that boost their morale. Evidence from this study overwhelmingly demonstrates that immediate action is not taken to correct concerns found during the PA process (98%), insufficient feedback (88%) lack of mutual goal setting between evaluator and performer at the close of the performance (82%) and that some jobs are more difficult to accurately assess than others due to immeasurable outcomes or the abstract nature of the job (82%).

The study also shows that in practice the PA system does not follow proper procedure (72%). Furthermore, while literature posits a positive relationship between PA systems and motivation, this study shows that the current PA damages employees' morale (64%). Similarly, respondents interviewed commented that the PA process is implemented haphazardly and hurriedly to justify legal demands limiting the avenue for participatory discussions between the appraisers and appraisee. Largely, these inadequacies reveal that the PA process in place is unlikely to foster enthusiasm among employees. It could also be argued that PA implemented as it is cannot be the only tool to use to make administrative decisions and guarantee employees are adequately engaged to heighten their morale in attaining organisational objectives.

It is crystal clear from the study that there should be more to PA that focuses on dialogue and a mechanism that helps the supervisor set and achieve shared objectives, leading to employee engagement and raising their enthusiasm. The study findings align with Syallow (2019) who aptly posits that employee appraisals instigate hatred and distrust among employees and only 5% of human resource managers are satisfied with the designed PA systems. Guarini et al. (2020) further contend that PA has significant negative drawbacks for organisations and he urges organisations not to use individual PA but rather evaluate the performance of a unit or department instead. Peter Scholtes (1993, as cited in Rasch, 2004) went so far as to say that PA, at best, does not work, and in the worst scenario, it can damage morale within the organisation. Therefore, taking respondents' views and findings from other studies collectively, it suits to conclude that PA systems require among other aspects; proper engagement of employees to boost enthusiasm which is fundamental for achieving competitive advantage.

Table 3. Problematic areas in PA

Problematic areas in PA	Yes	No
Damages employee's morale	32 (64%)	18 (36%)
Demands too much time	27 (54%)	23 (46%)
Insufficient feedback	44 (88%)	6 (12%)
Immediate action is not taken to correct concerns found during the PA process	49 (98%)	19 (38%)
Evaluators lack the necessary training to perform PA effectively	28 (56%)	22 (44%)

Some jobs are more difficult to accurately assess than others due to immeasurable outcomes or the abstract nature of the job	46 (92%)	4 (8%)
The absence of a new reward system for performers for their positive performance contributions	28 (56%)	22 (44%)
Evaluator's unwillingness/ inability to provide negative feedback	40 (80%)	10 (20%)
Do not properly follow procedures (forms and interviews)	36 (72%)	14 (28%)
Negative feedback leads to conflict	31 (62%)	19 (38%)
Lack of mutual goal setting between evaluator and performer at the close of the PA	41 (82%)	9 (18%)

4. Discussion

As noted above, the vast majority of appraisals are largely weakness-focused and retrospective in nature. Interviews from key informants recommend that the appraisal tool could be improved by; regular and timely feedback, continuous training to supervisors, reduction of the parameters of the appraisal to make it less cumbersome, allocating more time and platform for engaging and coaching the employees. Authors and practitioners (Coens & Jenkins, 2000; Gruman & Saks, 2011; Mone & London, 2018; Wellins et al., 2006) submit that it is now than ever before essential to get rid of the complex, time-consuming and potentially bureaucratic performance management process moving towards easy and more engaging evaluation process.

This study, however, argues that despite the challenges of PA it cannot be discredited entirely. It could be refurbished by improving conversation that engages the employee thereby boosting employee morale. For instance, need to give ongoing feedback and coaching designed to promote continuous employee development and engagement. This calls for collaborative dialogue doing away with the conventional way where employees cannot sit passively as recipients of feedback. Christopher (2012) suggested that attention and effort need to be shifted away from investing more time and resources in identifying and correcting weaknesses and towards identifying ways in which the employee can make positive contributions. Thus, with increased engagement, one is likely to find out how employees are committed to the organisation's mission.

Engendering high engagement in the employee evaluation process necessitates managers to regard their role less as judges and critical parents and more as maximisers and enablers of employees' strengths. Gruman and Saks (2011) cement that, to improve PA systems, it is important to focus on employee engagement as a driver of performance; it is suggested that organisations should redesign their PA systems to foster engagement so that it enhances engagement levels and improves performance.

Again, PAs must place the vast majority of effort and attention on developmental activities that strengthen future performance, rather than on rating the quality and quantity of past performance. Accordingly, a decision on developmental activities can be best attained through a two-way communication where the employees and supervisors can more effectively diagnose problems and produce joint solutions to performance challenges rather than mere appraisal forms. This guarantees the best strategy is to focus primarily on the underlying characteristics that energise employees and enable them to achieve peak performance provided they are meeting or exceeding expectations. Of course, if people fall below the required standards, then the conversation should be focused on their

shortfalls, with a robust exploration as to the reasons behind this and specific actions agreed for improvement, as well as assured support needed.

5. Conclusion

The research question of this research study is as follows: Does the PA in place motivate employees to achieve organisational objectives with enthusiasm? To answer the question, the researcher started by looking at the ability of the line managers to engage employees in the appraisal process. Additionally, the study tried to ascertain whether or not the PA system in place motivates employees to work with enthusiasm by analysing the problematic areas in the PA system. The study, therefore, concludes that although PA is considered to be crucial to motivate employees, the current PA narrowly motivates employees to work with enthusiasm.

On the one hand, the line managers' skills and ability to properly gather information on employee performance, link individual performance to organisational performance, have a candid dialogue with employees and provide coaching is narrow. On the other hand, the problematic areas in the current PA system do not offer a platform for boosting the morale of employees to work with enthusiasm. Thus, the current appraisal tool does not match the requirements of today's enterprise – one that is increasingly influenced by changes in work culture, particularly the need to win the hearts and minds of employees through continuous engagement and coaching.

The study recommends continuous training for line managers to guarantee employee engagement in the evaluation process, which will ultimately motivate employees, and ensure individual performance is linked to organisational performance. Most importantly, re-structuring the appraisal systems to minimise the problem areas to adequately engage and providing feedback continuously are needed, thereby boosting the morale of employees to work with a zeal.

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