

Improving the Effectiveness of Advisory Services Through Performance Appraisal

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In an attempt to increase the quality and effectiveness of academic advising, a task force at Auburn University examined the duties and responsibilities of academic advisors. From this job analysis, the author suggests a behavioral/results-oriented appraisal system that can be used to assess the performance of advisors.

Fielstein (1987) has pointed out that the success of postsecondary institutions in light of declining enrollments and shrinking budgets may depend largely on the success of the advising component. A major objective of student advising is, of course, to maximize the student's degree of persistence to graduation. Performance appraisal can play a major role in stimulating and maintaining successful performance of advisors.

In theory, performance appraisal measures the degree of success in accomplishing objectives. In reality, very few performance appraisal systems are effective. One authority points out that the search for effective performance appraisal techniques has gone on for decades and is the "Holy Grail" of human resources development (Levy, 1989). Reasons range from supervisory resistance to "playing God," to apprehensions and mistrust by subordinates, to equal employment opportunity liability resulting from subjective and impressionistic systems and criterion bias. Fortunately, the failures of the past have resulted in better appraisal methods and techniques. The new focus emphasizes such characteristics as on-site job analysis, performance-based criteria, rater knowledge of the system and its purpose, and administrative support for the performance appraisal system. Turning the significant potential of performance appraisal into productive reality is a difficult but attainable task.

Background

At Auburn University a 15-member ad hoc committee made up primarily of administrators responsible for undergraduate academic programs spent approximately one year conducting an in-depth study of the academic advising component with a view toward increasing effectiveness. As part of the study, the committee ana-

lyzed the duties and responsibilities of a number of positions and investigated the feasibility of establishing a performance appraisal program.

At the present time the structure and process of academic advising of Auburn University varies with the academic unit. In some schools and colleges the function is centralized in the dean's office. In others, faculty members are highly involved in all aspects of advising. The committee, however, was able to identify clusters of responsibilities, functions, and work activities that characterized the content of all key jobs.

The major design considerations for a performance appraisal program were that the appraisal would be behavioral/results-oriented, would be job specific, would meet validity standards prepared by Division 14 (Industrial Organizational Psychology) of the American Psychological Association, and would comply with legal requirements established by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the courts. A number of alternatives were considered, including behavioral anchored rating scales, management by objectives, and performance standards. The following is a discussion of the selected approach, known as behavioral observation scales, using the position of departmental school evaluator (recently retitled "academic advisor") as a model.

Method

The first step in developing behavioral observation scales was to conduct a job analysis. This required developing a list of task/activity statements, which, taken together, constitute a definition of the job. The term "job" as used here is a group of positions that are similar in duties and responsibilities. It does not necessarily contain the exact set of tasks that are carried out by any one individual. Job information was collected by the ad hoc committee and supplemented by responses to questionnaires from job incumbents as part of a university-wide study of support positions. The final listing and classification of tasks were accomplished by the author with assistance by a committee member with previous **experience in** job design and analysis in academic institutions.

Effective and legally defensible performance appraisal systems flow directly from job analysis, which provides a rational link between the content of the job and the content of the appraisal criteria (Buford, Burkhalter, & Jacobs, 1988). Using results-oriented statements provides both information for the job description and critical incidents of behavior for appraisal purposes (Plachy, 1987). Similar statements were grouped together to form one job dimension. For example, "edits registration data for students failing prerequisite courses and issues forced drop cards in a timely manner" was grouped with similar items to form the dimension of "registration services."

Some task statements were rewritten to better describe results-oriented behavior. For example, "performs credit checks for seniors" became "ensures seniors are aware of their status by performing credit checks at least two quarters prior to scheduled graduation." Also, statements were added as needed. The statement "expresses a desire to help students fulfill graduation requirements" was not developed during job analysis but is a necessary element of successful job performance. The job analysis yielded 29 tasks/activities grouped into three job dimensions (student counseling, registration services, and records management).

The job dimension of student counseling includes counseling students and providing a variety of guidance services relating to admission, orientation, program of study, student development, and graduation. Registration services is the coordination of enrollment activities such as registration, class schedules, withdrawals, credit evaluations, and related procedures. Records management consists of compiling and maintaining academic records of assigned students, including establishing a classification system, conducting file searches and retrieving materials, and providing for the security and preservation of vital records.

As pointed out previously, the performance appraisal system is based on the results of the job analysis. An approach that has been shown to be highly effective in a variety of settings (hospitals, electric utilities, academic institutions) is known as behavioral observation scales (BOS). The steps followed in developing the BOS were an adaptation of the procedures proposed by Latham and Wexley (1977, 1981).

Specificity of job dimensions was assessed by retranslation. This involved placing the statements in random order and having another

group of three persons, including an assistant dean of a college, an experienced job incumbent, and a counselor in the office of Student Development Services, reclassify the statements. The ratio of interjudge agreement was calculated by dividing the number of statements that both groups agreed should be placed in a given dimension by the combined number of tasks both groups placed in that dimension. In retranslation, a statement that is either placed in a different dimension or not classified at all by a majority of the group is discarded. However, this did not occur. The agreement ratio was .875 to 1.00 for all three job dimensions.

The job dimensions were then examined by a second group of persons who were intimately familiar with the work being performed. This group included a senior faculty member, a department head, and a coordinator of teacher education. These persons are the subject matter experts whose function is to ensure that the job analysis representatively samples the behavioral content of the job. Any disagreement regarding job content must be resolved at this stage. The subject matter experts in this case had no substantive comments regarding either the tasks or the job dimensions used to classify the tasks.

The performance appraisal form was developed by attaching a five-point Likert scale to each of the final behavioral statements. The rater is asked to indicate the frequency with which he or she has observed a job incumbent engaged in the behavior when the circumstances are appropriate. For example, in those situations requiring an evaluator to explain directives, decisions, and policies to students (Item 3, Table 1), the range of behavior is "almost never" (1) to "almost always" (5). The resulting continuum delineates possible performance on that item from unacceptable to excellent. Job incumbents receive a 1 if they engage in the behavior 0-64% of the time, 2 for 65-74%, 3 for 75-84%, 4 for 85-94%, and 5 for 95-100%. Table 1 illustrates the final appraisal format for the job dimension of student counseling. Together with similar formats for registration services and records management, the BOS captures the common core of job behaviors for virtually all evaluator positions. The scales should, of course, be individualized as necessary at the department or school level.

Note that performance on each dimension is established by the tentative value assigned to the cumulative point totals. At this point, no rules of combination have been established to determine

overall performance on all three job dimensions. One possibility is to weight performance on each dimension by the relative importance of the dimension. For example, based on such factors as time spent and consequence of error, the dimension of student counseling might be 25% of a particular evaluator's job. Another decision that has not been made is how to handle unsatisfactory performance in one or more items in a job dimension, even though overall performance in the dimension is acceptable. Finally, no assessment of reliability of this particular BOS has been made. It is anticipated that stability and consistency of results will be measured by having multiple raters appraise the perform-

ance of the same individual. These and other administrative details will be addressed during a period of pilot testing of both the concept and instrument.

Discussion

A performance appraisal system should be valid, cost-effective, and practical. In the BOS described above, validity is established through job analysis, retranslation and interjudge agreement, and the use of subject matter experts. This ensures that the criteria are measuring what they purport to measure. The process also complies with the requirements of the "Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures" (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1978), which is needed if ratings are ever challenged by an enforcement agency or a court.

A major advantage of BOS is that they are considered by many authorities to be as good as or better than the behavioral anchored rating scales most frequently recommended by industrial psychologists (Latham & Wexley, 1977; Buford, 1989). Developing the BOS is far less costly and also very practical in that emphasis is placed on observing day-to-day job functions. The rater is familiar with the behaviors and results that are necessary for effective job performance and the incumbent knows what the rater is looking for.

An effective performance appraisal system has, of course, many additional features. The purpose and uses of the system should be clearly stated in organizational policy. Standards should be developed to cover how often appraisals are to be conducted, who will appraise, what documentation is required, and how one can appeal the appraisal. Appraisal instruments should provide for administration under standardized and controlled conditions. Finally, rater training is essential. No system can overcome errors in observing and measuring performance, nor can it compensate for inept supervisory behaviors. The BOS are not the end point. Rather, they are the basis for identifying, negotiating, and measuring job-related performance expectations.

Implications

A 1985 survey of all NACADA members indicated a number of staff development activities—including evaluation (appraisal)—could be expected to improve advising programs (Polson & Gordon, 1988). A large number of institu-

Table 1
Example of Behavioral Observation Scales for Student Counseling

1. Keeps current on the details of university and school policies on admission, continuation in residence, transfer, and graduation to give correct advice to students.	Almost Never	1	2	3	4	5	Almost Always
2. Expresses a desire to help students fulfill their academic requirements.	Almost Never	1	2	3	4	5	Almost Always
3. Clearly explains to students the directives, decisions, and policies that will affect them.	Almost Never	1	2	3	4	5	Almost Always
4. Advises and assists students in proper course selection.	Almost Never	1	2	3	4	5	Almost Always
5. Assists students in planning their programs by early identification of possible future problems in course offerings, schedules, conflicts, and related situations.	Almost Never	1	2	3	4	5	Almost Always
6. Takes care to keep departmental coordinators informed concerning scheduling and academic matters outside their scope of authority so that problems can be resolved.	Almost Never	1	2	3	4	5	Almost Always
7. When necessary, refers students to Student Development Services for in-depth career counseling.	Almost Never	1	2	3	4	5	Almost Always
8. Refers students to appropriate agency for personal and/or nonacademic counseling.	Almost Never	1	2	3	4	5	Almost Always
Total = _____							
	Unacceptable	Marginal	Acceptable	Very Good	Excellent*		
	8-13	14-20	21-27	28-34	34-40		

*Numerical values are set by administration

tions have task forces or committees in place to study methods, priorities, organization structure, career development, and effectiveness in the area of student advising. Many of these and other issues focus directly on the duties and responsibilities of positions in the advising component. There would therefore seem to be both a need and an opportunity to use this information to develop effective performance appraisal programs.

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