

Improving the performance appraisal system for nurses

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Seven staff nurses were nervous and some said they dreaded the appraisal appointment because of fear of criticism and being informed of poor performance. One staff member looked forward to the appraisal.

I would suggest that employees should prepare for an appraisal in a positive manner and use the opportunity to discuss career opportunities, salary increases and professional growth.

Previous experience of appraisal will have a great bearing on preparation and approach; therefore negativity will influence the system. The seven nurses who expressed nervousness had all previously thought their appraisals were poorly delivered or had negative outcomes. Four had been appraised by the same manager and emphasis was placed on the manager's performance. The nurse who was positive had an excellent previous review with reward benefits.

Appraisal literature suggests that not all managers are efficient at recognising high potential and positive performance and concentrate more on the organisation itself, tailoring personal development to meet those needs instead of the individual's needs. Therefore staff who do not fully fit into the organisation's mould or philosophy could be viewed as underperformers, and often have feelings of resentment and alienation.

Self-assessment

All eight nurses were uncomfortable writing about themselves in the pre-appraisal questionnaire. Traditionally, employees have been encouraged to reflect on their own performance for 2-3 weeks before the appraisal interview, and this self-assessment has then formed the basis for discussion.

A review of the literature on previous organisational surveys has shown that employees invariably consider themselves to be better than average. This then poses a problem for the appraiser who has to inform staff that the self-assessment is too positive, which almost certainly creates a negative relationship.

To prevent conflict and interpersonal difficulties, appraisers tend to agree with the appraisee to the detriment of the process. Taylor (1998) suggested that a badly conducted appraisal is worse than no appraisal at all in terms of its adverse effect on motivation, job satisfaction, commitment and trust between managers and employees.

Feedback

All eight nurses agreed with feedback and were satisfied with the outcomes at the appraisal. However, they felt disillusioned that feedback and action plans were never revisited and completed, and the result carried forward to the next appraisal.

This suggests feedback is one of the most vital parts of the appraisal system, since any person who receives positive feedback can be motivated to continue or improve performance to meet organisational requirements. Negative feedback must be accompanied by advice on how to remedy or improve performance.

Setting aside time for the appraisal interview and then planning time for reviews and further feedback is paramount in maintaining motivation and enhanced performance. It is important that planned reviews are adhered to, as failure to attend or cancelling the appointment will demotivate staff.

Cancelling appointments

Four out of the eight nurses had experienced at least one cancelled appointment due to either their own or their manager's other work commitments. This led to feelings that

both the appraisal system and the appraisee personally lacked importance. However, they also expressed relief that the appointment was cancelled.

Managers and employees need to be clear about the purpose of appraisal and how to measure success or failure. For any appraisal to be worth the time and cost, all levels and grades of staff must feel they have a valuable contribution to make in developing their organisation's strategy and ensuring achievement.

Failure to adhere to the time designated devalues the importance and reduces commitment to the appraisal system. Although executives block out large sections of their diaries to ensure attendance, all too often the appraisal is the first appointment to be cancelled when other needs arise.

Motivation to improve

Due to the negative nature of seven of the eight nurses' previous appraisals, motivation and improved performance were not achieved directly.

The threat of disciplinary procedures due to inadequate standards of practice could have been a possible factor in motivating two to improve, as their performance was being managed. However, each acknowledged the extensive support offered, and felt that this was the true factor in their motivation to improve.

Five nurses suggested they continued at the same level. One was extremely motivated and ensured performance standards were maintained because of the rewards gained, recognition and potential for promotion.

All eight staff completed the necessary documentation and had undergone an appraisal review. None had seriously given much thought to the process, accepting it as part of the organisation's system. However, they all acknowledged some areas could be improved significantly to meet their development needs.

Improving appraisals .The questionnaire and summary proved extremely informative. Taking into account experience, suggestions and current evidence, an improved appraisal system is clearly required to replace the existing one.

The most fundamental question facing those setting up appraisals is: 'What is the aim of the exercise to be?' (Fletcher, 2004). The organisation in which I work already has an aim in its appraisal system; it is to promote equality and support staff to perform and achieve their full potential within the organisational framework. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that the original appraisal system was not implemented for this reason and was constructed in 1986 as part of a management qualification of one of the senior managers.

Fletcher (2004) acknowledged that appraisals were not given any credibility until the 1990s. Therefore, in one aspect, the organisation was indirectly adopting a pioneering concept. However, appraisals and performance reviews have been implemented since the 1950s with content as discriminatory as assessing personal traits and moral courage.

To implement an appraisal system that will be successfully embraced by all users, it must have clear aims and objectives, be able to be implemented fairly and have relatively simple documentation. One of the main issues in my organisation's appraisal is the lack of guidance for managers and nurses on how to undertake and complete appraisals. Initial guidance produced for their introduction in 1986 remains the only advice available. It has not been reviewed or updated since then.

It is essential that nurses complete a pre-appraisal questionnaire to demonstrate self-awareness and to establish a basis for communication. However, as previously mentioned, appraisees overestimating their abilities can result in a negative atmosphere when actual abilities or managers' beliefs differ. Consequently, the existing pre-appraisal questionnaire has been altered to lead to open dialogue during

the appraisal.

A further significant adjustment is the recognition of structured feedback and action planning with follow-up throughout the year. Some managers in the organisation have not followed up set targets and not ensured that action plans are completed, leading to inconsistencies and a devaluing of the process and aims. We are introducing an additional document to ensure these become integral to the process. This once again suggests that feedback is a vital part of the appraisal process, fundamental to achieving outcomes and assessing performance.

Training for managers

It is apparent that to have efficient staff who feel respected and valued, managers must reward current work and give constructive criticism carefully to promote performance improvement. Failure to deliver an appraisal in this manner can deplete enthusiasm and commitment. Managers must be aware of employees' abilities and have the knowledge and skills to adapt to situations. Staff training is a vital component as not all managers will have qualifications or experience in human resource management. There is an increasing recognition in the organisation that training and support for appraisers is inadequate. This includes managers undertaking trained nurse appraisals, and trained nurses and shift leaders carrying out healthcare assistant supervisions and appraisals. To validate the required training, a recognised external body has been appointed to deliver accredited training for appraisers. All appraisers must undertake at least two days of training before performing appraisals. In this manner, the theory and application of the appraisal process can be clearly understood and recognised methodologies applied within the company. The accreditation of this training further acknowledges the value of the appraisal cycle within the organisation. It will become an integral part of an internal degree pathway for all registered nurses. In addition, all new registered nurses and shift leaders will undertake the two-day training before undertaking appraisals. This training is a significant financial commitment for the organisation. The development of an open, participative, learning environment is part of the company's development ethos. A review of the appraisal system is now viewed as an integral part of this development. Support from all levels of management is required to ensure consistency between staff and managers. To change employees' attitudes it is necessary to inform them of the benefits and the importance of appraisals. This message must be delivered and relevant structures adopted to achieve changed attitudes and acceptance. It is very clear from both internal and external research that employees at all levels need praise, guidance and supervision to support them in their role to both develop performance and enhance personal achievement.

The revised appraisal system, whereby appraisers have received appropriate training before undertaking the process, should now be an integral part of the organisation's culture and not simply a tick-box exercise.

Implications for practice

Organisations should consider the following points to improve the appraisal system:

- Existing practice and systems should be reviewed to ensure up-to-date practice and awareness of government guidelines;
- The appraisal process should be carried out in a non-judgemental, unbiased manner to ensure positive delivery and increase staff motivation;
- Consistent appraising and feedback is required to allow staff to prepare and accept appraisals as a support tool and not a paper exercise;
- The timing of appraisals and their content must be conducive to development and not used as an opportunity to discipline a staff member;

- In order to complete a satisfactory appraisal, a structured system must be used. The result should leave the appraiser and appraisee clear about the aims, plans and future development objectives, with specific dates for reviews set and adhered to. In summary the organization had an open, participative environment of which personal development was viewed as an integral part. However, the appraisal process was an outdated paper exercise with negative connotations for most staff involved. Literature indicates that appraisals have often been completed in a haphazard way with poor feedback on performance. This view was reflected in the organization, as the appraisal form was filed following interviews and not reviewed or subject to further feedback. The external, accredited appraisal training has focused awareness on the importance of regular review and feedback, to ensure motivation and personal development. The use of appraisal to support personal and organizational development is now becoming established in the company, and the revision of appraisal records will assist with these improvements. It is extremely important that this impetus is not lost and the use of continuing appraisal training will assist with this goal. In addition, two senior managers will become responsible for managing and reviewing the appraisal tracking and ensuring that all new staff receive appropriate training. A small appraisal subgroup will be formed to ensure documentation and systems are regularly reviewed and updated, maintaining appraisal as an important part of working life in the organization.