

# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

## TEACHING PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL SKILLS: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

Eileen K. Burton, Arizona State University

### ABSTRACT

Teaching people interpersonal skills is a difficult task. In management, interpersonal skills are becoming more important and there is increasing pressure on business schools to teach students to effectively use those skills. Performance appraisal is an example where the need for interpersonal skills is gaining importance. This paper presents a design and methodology for improving the effectiveness of teaching the interpersonal skills involved in performance appraisal. The design emphasizes realism, observation, and feedback.

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching within a business school has a distinctly different emphasis than does teaching within traditional academic areas. In a business school, students must be taught to perform duties as well as possess information. This requirement forces the business school instructor to bring action and organizational situations into the classroom.

This challenge to teach students to do offers particular problems to management professors where the requisite skills are often interpersonal ones. As organizations become more complex, interpersonal skills become more and more important. Increasing pressure is being put on business schools to improve students' abilities to handle management problems.

In the past, interpersonal skills instruction has emphasized telling people what they should say. But knowing what to say and actually saying it are very different things. The business school instructor needs to provide an opportunity within the classroom to experiment with interpersonal responses to actual organizational situations.

A good example of a common interpersonal management problem is performance appraisal. Performance appraisal is receiving renewed attention in management circles because of the increasing concern for productivity, the increasing cost of labor, growth of service-oriented organizations, and government legislation stressing that employment decisions be based on job-related criteria. Yet few supervisors or managers are trained to carry out effective performance appraisal. In the past, organizations have primarily expressed concern only over the appraisal instrument that was being used. Effective performance appraisal, however, is an interpersonal process and no matter how good the appraisal instrument is, it is the communication process between supervisor and subordinate that makes or breaks performance appraisal.

This paper presents a design and experience-based methodology for teaching students to understand the process of performance appraisal through observation of and participation in role play situations. The design is unusual in that it provides a tight link between learning objectives and practiced behaviors and that feedback provides the primary learning for both participants and observers.

### DESIGN

This approach to teaching performance appraisal skills contains two critical elements: realism and feedback. Without realism the exercise fails to provide the student with practical ways to respond to an actual management problem. The second element of the design is to provide feedback. Without feedback the exercise is empty--a simple, isolated behavior from which little can be learned. With these two critical elements in mind a 4-step design for teaching performance appraisal skills is given below:

- Step 1 Identify the interpersonal elements in performance appraisal.
- Step 2 Describe actual organization situations where the interpersonal problems occur.
- Step 3 Run the role play of the organization situations.
- Step 4 Provide feedback to participants and observers regarding the effectiveness of the interpersonal elements.

#### Step 1

First the instructor must identify the important interpersonal elements present in performance appraisal. These elements become the learning objectives for the session. Examples might be: listening, body language, type of feedback, etc. It is important to focus on only a few, specific learning objectives so that the other steps of the design can be clearly linked to those objectives.

#### Step 2

To ensure realism, the instructor needs to draw the role play scenario from an actual organization problem. By using a problem frequently encountered by managers, the exercise can provide truly useful information to the student. In addition, familiar organizational problems provide the instructor the depth necessary to set out a complete role-play scenario including past events and personality variables. As in any exercise, students cling to concrete information. It is important to give sufficient facts, for ambiguity will often focus the exercise on something other than the interpersonal process.

#### Step 3

At this point the role play is run in the classroom. Pairs of students (or groups, depending on the interpersonal problem) will role play the actual organization problem. The organization scenarios are not scripted because an important part of the interpersonal process is the flow of conversation and reactions of participants to that conversation. Since management problems generally develop over time, giving out the scenarios sometime before the role play will allow the student to have thought through the interpersonal skills necessary for his or her part. The appropriate time for the role play will depend on the interpersonal process being learned. Instructors should strive for a time similar to what would be allowed in an actual organization.

#### Step 4

In this design feedback is the learning mechanism for both the participant and the observer. To be useful,

## Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

feedback needs to be tied to the learning objectives in Step 1. Feedback also needs to be specific and behavioral in Context. Developing a feedback recording form tied to the learning objectives and interpersonal elements important to the situation will aid in the feedback process. (See Exhibit 1 and Exhibit 2) Students are instructed to observe the behaviors, words, and reactions of the role-play participants. As they observe the specific interpersonal process and record what is taking place, their learning is enhanced because they are actively involved in the process. It would be ideal to allow each student to participate in a role play but in most classroom situations that is not possible. Thus the feedback form provides the student with specific behavioral information on the interpersonal process under study. Also, making the student responsible for observing and recording behaviors so that useful feedback can be given is actually teaching the student a useful performance appraisal skill in itself.

### CLASSROOM ILLUSTRATION

Students involved in the exercise were enrolled in an upper division personnel class. For comparison purposes, the same exercise was used in a corporate training program given by the author. Four pairs of students participated in the role play. The rest of the class acted as observers. Role-play scenarios were given to all students before the role plays were to take place. Each role-play lasted 15 minutes. Feedback was recorded on the sheets shown in Exhibits 1 and 2.

#### Objectives

The three learning objectives for the exercise were:

- (1) to increase the students' awareness of the interpersonal elements involved in performance appraisal, (2) to increase the students' understanding of the participant's response to threatening and non-threatening discussion, and (3) to provide students with alternative effective behaviors they could use in the performance appraisal process.

#### Interpersonal Elements

Four interpersonal elements were identified as relating to this goal. They are:

1. Providing specific information. The more specific examples of problem job behaviors given, the less threatened the subordinate feels and thus he or she is more willing to accept information from the supervisor.
2. Using judgment words. The more judgmental words (good, bad, wrong, right) are used, the more threatening the performance appraisal process.
3. Subject of discussion. The more feedback is aimed at the person, rather than the organizational need, the more threatening the performance appraisal process.
4. Orientation of discussion. The more past behavior rather than future behavior is discussed, the more defensive the person becomes during performance appraisal.

#### Scenarios

Performance appraisal offers many organizational problem situations. The four identified for this exercise were:

1. Telling a subordinate that he or she did not get an expected promotion.
2. Telling a subordinate about his or her poor work quality and quantity.
3. Telling a subordinate about his or her poor personal behavior on job.
4. Acting as a new supervisor appraising an 'inherited' poor worker.

All of these situations were drawn from actual organization problems presented to the author. Specific scenarios were developed for each situation. Exhibit 3 gives the complete scenario for situation 4. Situation 4 is used as an example because it poses a frequent and complex problem for managers. Often managers feel there is no way out of 'inherited' problems and indeed many organizations make it difficult to deal with them.

At this point it is useful to mention that, consistent with the contingency theory of management, there is no correct" behavior or right answer being sought to the problem. Rather, students observe several approaches to dealing with the situation and the reactions generated and use those to develop their way of resolving the problem. These approaches and reactions are the primary topic of the feedback session.

#### Feedback

Feedback was gathered on either Form 1 or Form 2 (Recording Feedback Information on Role Play) shown in Exhibits 1 and 2 respectively. Half the class recorded the actual number of times certain behaviors took place (Form 1). The other half of the class wrote down descriptions of what was occurring during the role play (Form 2). Using both types of information (data and descriptive) increased the usefulness of feedback. Not only could students provide actual examples of behavior but the relative frequency of that behavior could be established. This allowed students to focus on common behaviors that were functional or dysfunctional to the appraisal process. This behavioral focus was especially important to students in setting up ways to change their interpersonal behaviors and in recognizing the responses of others to these behaviors.

Examples of the feedback recorded are given in Table 1 and Table 2. Table 1 shows the frequency of the identified important interpersonal elements of performance appraisal (Form 1).

From the table it becomes clear that the two effective interactions, giving specific information on job behaviors and discussing future behaviors, were recorded only half as often as the ineffective behaviors. This occurred even though

TABLE 1

Interaction During Role Play

<u>Participants</u>	<u>Interactions</u>		
	Specific Description	General Description	Judgment Words
Students	38	72	36
Trainees	43	89	84
	<u>The Word You</u>	<u>Past Behavior</u>	<u>Future Behavior</u>
Students	198	40	48
Trainees	167	84	45

students 'knew' which interactions were more effective in giving performance appraisal. During feedback on the use of ineffective interactions (using judgment words, use of the word 'you,' emphasis on past behavior, and giving general descriptions of the problem behavior) students were surprised how easy it was to use these ineffective interactions. One

# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

student remarked it seemed the 'natural' way respond.

Another surprise for the students was the incredible frequency of the use of the word 'you.' From the transactional analysis literature we know that the use of the word "you" often puts the appraisee on the defensive. An accusatory interaction is established and the appraisee feels he or she must explain (defend) actions or more commonly fix the blame on another. Neither behavior is useful for getting the person to accept responsibility for the problem behavior or to change that behavior. During feedback the appraisee in the role play attested to the fact that they felt defensive when the appraiser used the word "you" frequently.

TABLE 2

Common Phrase/Reaction Linkages in Role Play

Reaction	Activating Phrase
#1	Improve or get out.
#2	What do you think is the problem? You can get into that performance group.
#3	Do you want me to be a clone? Is there a hidden agenda here? We can't all be stars.
#4	If there's something you want me to do just tell me. I want to make you happy.
#5	I know it's going to end there. Talking to you doesn't help any.

Table 2 gives examples of the actual interactions that took place during the role play. Again, students were surprised. More than one appraiser exclaimed: "Did I really say that?!" During feedback these examples formed the base of developing alternative responses. Since some of the examples given were positive they provided models for effective interactions.

The specific examples of responses also enabled the class to discuss appraisee/appraiser reactions to given statements. When a specific statement was repeated, the participants could discuss their reactions to the statement. This allowed feedback to focus on reaction rather than 'right' or "wrong" things to say. The focus on reaction provides the student with much more useful information. If the student can recognize reactions during performance appraisal he or she can rephrase or clarify what is being said to keep the appraisal session effective.

The learning gained from the use of the feedback form and resulting discussion came in the form of increased awareness of ineffective interactions and the development of alternative interactions. The data from Form 1 on frequency of Interactions made the students and trainees aware of how often ineffective interactions were used. They had no idea they were so common and they are now much more conscious of using these ineffective interactions. The first step to changing behaviors is the awareness of the actual behavior and its frequency. The exercise clearly provided

this information.

The second form of learning from the exercise, developing alternative interactions, came primarily through the use of Form 2. Form 2 provided actual examples of feedback given during the role play. Discussion of these examples focused on the reaction of the appraisee and the giving of recommendations for changing the interaction. Students, therefore, were developing a variety of approaches to dealing with the performance appraisal situation. The discussion provided them with practice in using effective interpersonal interactions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The above exercise proved a valuable experience for the students. Not only did they become aware of interactions that were ineffective in performance appraisal but saw how frequently they were used. In addition, they were given the opportunity to generate alternative effective interactions. The learning from the exercise goes well beyond that which would occur by simply telling the students what they should do to improve the effectiveness of performance appraisal. This is evidenced by the greater frequency of ineffective behaviors versus effective behaviors observed in the role play even though the students 'knew' which interactions were appropriate.

The obvious next step for the research is to see to what extent the classroom practice was carried over to job behaviors. With students this is a difficult task since they will scatter into many different work environments and there are many intervening variables between the classroom role play and their first performance appraisal session. With the trainees, however, continued measurement is much more feasible. A follow-up study on the trainees is planned for six months following the training. The follow-up study will focus on the extent to which ineffective interpersonal interactions had decreased during performance appraisal.

The design used in this exercise provides a model for teaching other interpersonal skills in management. The elements of realism, observation and recording of information, and feedback focused on alternative behaviors, do much to enhance the learning of the student toward actually being able to put into action what he or she knows. The more opportunities are provided for students to practice what they know the more likely students will be able to use their knowledge in their workplace.

### EXHIBIT 1

#### Form 1

#### Recording Feedback Information on Role Play

Record the number of times you heard:

1. A specific description of behavior (the report you turned in had an incorrect total). \_\_\_\_\_
2. A general description of behavior (the report wasn't done right). \_\_\_\_\_
3. Judgment words (good, bad, smart, stupid, wrong). \_\_\_\_\_
4. The word you (you did it wrong). \_\_\_\_\_
5. Recounting of past behavior (you forgot to lock the door last night). \_\_\_\_\_
6. Reference to future behavior (next time please lock the door). \_\_\_\_\_

Specific Recommendations:

# Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

## EXHIBIT 2

### Form 2 Recording Feedback Information on Role Play

Record what was being said when each reaction occurred.  
(In other words: give an example.)

1. Supervisor was intimidating:
2. Supervisor was non-threatening:
3. Subordinate was defensive:
4. Subordinate was accepting:
5. Subordinate was defeated:

### Specific Recommendations

## EXHIBIT 3

### Scenario for Role Play

#### General Information:

Performance appraisal will take place in the organization in one month. This supervisor is a first line manager who has 12 people under his (her) supervision. Those people are well trained customer representatives who have no one working directly for them. The supervisor has been on the job for three months (promoted from customer representative in another division) and has had some time to observe the customer representative's work, but given the confusion of a new job is not thoroughly familiar with each person's performance. The supervisor's boss would like to see this department "tightened up" and complaints decreased. The organization is conservative and while people have been fired, it is not with regularity.

#### The Role of the Supervisor: (Sue or Sam Jones)

You were a good customer representative for 1 year and now have been promoted to manager of 12 sales representatives. You have a business degree with some managerial training but little experience. You think you understand the job of a customer representative well. You have been told by the other customer representative managers that your employee (Bill or Betty) White is really a loser. Information in the personnel file shows average ratings over the last 8 years. Your observations of his (her) work indicate that not much work is getting done; that there is little effort to solve problems; and that customers are treated with minimal concern. Since your boss is putting the pressure on you to tighten up this department, you are concerned about employee White. You want to move up in management in this company and you feel you are being tested.

#### The Role of Subordinate:

You have been here for 8 years and have seen 5 supervisors come and go. You consider yourself an average worker. You don't go out of your way to help people but that doesn't seem to be rewarded anyway. Your attitude is to not get worked up over things. If ignored many things go away. Your past performance appraisals have been okay and you're not worried about this new supervisor. She (he) will be like all the rest--try to shake you up and then give up.