

Performance Appraisal: A Supervision or Leadership Tool?

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Abstract

Although there is substantial literature on the use of performance appraisal in the for-profit sector, there is little literature available concerning the appraisal of staff positions in American higher education. This study provides a detailed look in a population of 108 colleges and universities. Dissatisfaction was found with the appraisal process due to (a) lack of leadership support, (b) supervisors not being held accountable for the timely completion of appraisals, and (c) the lack of training provided supervisors for doing performance appraisals well.

Key Words: performance appraisal, higher education, staff, supervision, leadership

Introduction

Performance appraisal is an unavoidable element of organizational life (Brown, 1988; Longenecker & Fink, 1999). There are many decisions in modern organizations that depend on performance appraisals, and they are widely used in most organizations (Burkhalter & Buford, 1989; Davis, 2001; DeNisi, 1996; Wanguri, 1995). They are an important piece of the process by which organizations attempt to direct themselves (Kreitner, 1998; Landy & Farr, 1983), and they have been considered a key component in the success of organizations for most of the twentieth century (Grote, 2002; Pettijohn, Parker, Pettijohn, & Kent, 2001; Rasch, 2004; Starcher, 1996).

Performance appraisal allows organizations to inform their employees about their rates of growth, their competencies, and their potentials. It enables employees to be intentional in creating their individual developmental goals to help in their personal growth. There is little disagreement that if performance appraisal is done well, it serves a very useful role in reconciling the needs of the individual and the needs of the organization (Cleveland, Landy, & Zedeck, 1983; Conry & Kemper, 1993; Grote, 1996). If used well, performance appraisal is an influential tool that organizations have to organize and coordinate the power of every employee of the organization towards the achievement of its strategic goals (Grote, 2002; Lewis, 1996). It can focus each employee's mind on the organization's mission, vision, and core values. However, if performance appraisal is not done well, Grote suggests the process can become the object of jokes and the target of ridicule.

Literature Review

Performance evaluation methods are the systems and processes through which appraisal is carried out in an organization. The methods include determining the types of data collected and evaluated in the appraisal, the forms and frequencies of communication that take place between supervisors and their employees, and the various types of evaluation tools used to measure performance. It is important to understand the evaluation methods used because they can influence the usefulness of the appraisal system in an organization and the perceived or actual benefits gained from its use. Performance evaluation methods have been described by multiple authors in various ways. Landy and Farr (1983) define a method in which the performance appraisal data is organized into two groups: judgmental or subjective measures and nonjudgmental or objective measures. Although judgmental measures are more broadly used, objective performance measurements (e.g. production rates, time to complete a task, and scrap rates) have been helpful measures of performance for routine, manual jobs since the 1940s (Rothe, 1946). Other non-judgmental indices that do not assess performance directly but provide information on the general health of the organization, including absenteeism, turnover, and accidents, have also been researched (Campbell, Ford, Rumsey, Pulakos, Borman & Felker 1990). Objective measures do have their unique problems, however.

For example, absentee measures are not applicable to many jobs, are often inaccurate, are caused by a variety of reasons depending on the meaning of absence, differ in the duration of observation, and do not show a relationship with each other (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). Using turnover as a standard is complicated because it is hard to differentiate between voluntary and compulsory turnover. Grievances are not typically obtainable for nonunion employees. Accidents could be caused by the people or by their environments. The rate of promotion or salary increases are not good standards because the rate could be controlled by a quota set by the organization and salary modifications could be influenced by the economic well-being of the organization rather than employee performance. These problems challenge the validity of the measures (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995).

Landy and Farr (1983) also identified several problems with objective measures and potential reasons why judgmental measures have been used instead by psychologists for evaluating managerial behavior. First, objective measures tend to have low reliability. For example, factors external to the individual, such as the organization's sick leave policies, may influence the reliability of absence measures or the period of inspection may not be constant across measures. Another reason is that objective measures may be obtainable for only a partial number of jobs. For example, it does not make sense to collect information on tardiness or absences from sales representatives or development employees who may not work a fixed number of hours per day or per week. A final inadequacy of objective performance measures is the changing nature of skilled and semi-skilled work. When employees who operate machines are replaced by employees who just tend to a machine, the output of the job can become more reliant on the machine functioning correctly and its related downtime, rather than upon the ability and output of the machine operator. The changing nature of work implies that subjective measurements may continue to be more popular and useful compared to objective measures (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995).

The use of management by objectives (MBO) to define and measure job performance is often used with managerial and executive performance. There is a particular importance placed on the contribution of the employee to the organization's goals and results (Drucker, 1954). There are several elements common to MBO programs. First, MBO includes involvement in goal-setting. The supervisor and the subordinate work together to define the goals and performance measurements for the subordinate. They decide what needs to be achieved and how the achievements will be measured. Secondly, MBO entails objective feedback regarding advancement towards accomplishing the goals. In a MBO system, performance is likely to be defined in terms of measurable outcomes. However, the setting of goals, targets, and objectives is very subjective, involving negotiation between the manager and the employee (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). If a high performing employee fails to achieve his or her goals, it is not unusual for the manager to renegotiate objectives so that the manager can be sure that the capable performer will obtain outcomes that are seen as good performance. Two of the disadvantages of a MBO system include a significant amount of paperwork, particularly in the beginning stages of a new system, and the concern that MBO tries to make unclear responsibilities and goals exact and compels employees to measure objectives that are not measurable (Berman, 1980).

In another method for describing evaluation procedures, Sims and Foxley (1980) provide four classifications used in higher education, specifically by college student affairs professionals: comparative methods, absolute standards, management by objectives, and direct indexes. Comparative methods include: (a) rank-ordering all employees from lowest to highest in effectiveness; (b) alternately choosing the most effective and then the least effective employee, moving their names to separate lists and repeating the process until all names have been removed from the initial list; (c) comparing each employee to every other employee and determining a final ranking based on how many times the employee was ranked above the other employees; and (d) a forced distribution where a certain percentage of the employees are classified as top performers, perhaps a second group in the next tier, and then another group assigned to the lowest performing group.

Absolute standards methods have several variations including critical incidents, weighted checklists, forced choice, conventional rating, and behaviorally anchored rating scales. Critical incidents involves identifying the significant requirements of a job and the supervisor is asked to rate each employee on each category. Weighted checklists involve compiling a list of employee goals that the supervisor uses for each employee to determine which of the goals was completed. Forced choice requires the supervisor to choose the most descriptive statements for each employee using a list of items that differentiate between successful and unsuccessful completion and between desirable and undesirable employee traits. Conventional rating involves rating employee traits on a form using such categories as excellent, average, and poor.

Behaviorally anchored rating scales are a quantitative version of the critical incident method that uses scales anchored in descriptors of actual position behavior and specific levels of performance. The above examples of evaluation methods provide a comprehensive overview of the types of methods most often used by various organizations. They fall along a continuum between subjective and objective methods and between unstructured and structured methods.

Rating Scale Format

The rating scale format deserves additional explanation because most of the research on performance appraisal is about the design of appraisal scales. The issues deal with (a) comparisons between persons (norm-referenced criteria) and comparisons with a standard (criterion-referenced formats), (b) use of trait compared to behavioral anchors, (c) the best possible quantity of anchors, (d) establishing formats conducive to the smallest number of rater errors, (e) scaling of anchors, and (f) comparison of format validity (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995).

Within the rating scale format, most research has been done in the area of criterion-referenced scales with the goal of increasing the measurement quality and the values that such scales generate (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). The research endeavored to understand the meaning of the response categories or anchors, the kinds of anchors (trait, behavior, adjective, number, etc.), and the quantity of anchors that yielded distinct ratings and that raters found adequate.

When rating scales are used, there is an assumption that the appraiser is relatively objective and precise. However, the appraiser's memory could possibly be fallible and the appraiser may subscribe to assumptions about the person being evaluated that may or may not be accurate. The appraiser's intentional or unintentional biases produce rating errors. Seldin (1988) provides a list of potential biases that could arise in this situation. These include halo bias, which refers to the tendency of supervisors to be influenced in one area of performance by the rating they gave their employee in another area of performance. Leniency occurs when a supervisor gives a disproportionate number of favorable or unfavorable ratings. Central tendency bias refers to when a supervisor consistently gives average ratings and avoids the favorable and unfavorable ends of the rating scale. This both penalizes the outstanding performer and covers up the poor performance of underachievers. It also has a detrimental impact on the morale of other employees. Recency bias occurs when recent events have more influence on the appraisal than less recent events. An employee's entire year of very favorable performance can be negatively impacted by a single unfavorable event occurring just before the performance evaluation is completed. Or on the contrary, a mediocre performance over the course of a year can be overshadowed by one very recent success. Guessing bias occurs when the supervisor does not have relevant information to render a meaningful judgment, but provides a response anyway based on some aspect of the employee's performance. Seldin (1988) concludes that there is no simple way to evaluate performance despite significant advancement in evaluation procedures.

Guidelines for a Successful Performance Appraisal System

Many researchers have studied the performance appraisal process with the goal of determining the components of a successful performance appraisal system. Longenecker and Fink (1999) found that a successful performance appraisal system could be divided into three critical components: systems design, managerial practice, and appraisal system support, with each component containing several factors (see Figure 1). The systems design component requires a clearly defined purpose for conducting performance appraisal. All employees must understand why performance appraisal is being conducted and the specific goals for it. The specific goals will allow the managers to select performance criteria that will support the organization's objectives and increase the motivation of the managers to carry out the appraisals properly.

A second factor of effective systems design is to have the input of managers and employees in the design, development, and choice of criteria used in the appraisal. This promotes acceptance and ownership of the system by the employees which then increases the effectiveness of the system. Without this involvement, the appraisal system risks losing the support and credibility of the users of the system and can short-circuit their sense of ownership of the system. Roberts (2003) notes that employee involvement is a useful tool for increasing job-related autonomy, which is a prerequisite for employee growth. Roberts also points out that employee participation gives employees voice in the appraisal process which gives the employee the opportunity to refute performance ratings, documentation, or verbal feedback with which they disagree. If employees are convinced the appraisal process is fair, they are more likely to acknowledge their performance ratings, including unfavorable ones.

The third factor addresses the importance of user-friendly and easy-to-understand appraisal procedures and forms. The performance criteria, rating procedures, and feedback should be relevant and meaningful for both supervisors and their employees. The forms should facilitate communication between the supervisors and the employees concerning behaviors, work processes, and opportunities to improve.

The final factor within an effective systems design is an understanding by both supervisors and their employees of the appraisal process and their roles in it. This requires that they have training and education. The above four factors establish a firm systems foundation needed to build the additional components of an effective appraisal system which will now be discussed.

The second critical component of a successful appraisal system defined by Longenecker and Fink (1999) consists of three factors concerning managerial systems practices. The first factor is supervisors must conduct performance planning at the beginning of the appraisal cycle. Performance planning includes writing job descriptions and reviewing them with the employees, setting and agreeing upon goals, and communicating the expectations of behaviors and results for which the employees will be held accountable. The second factor is supervisors must provide ongoing, informal feedback to their employees throughout the course of the appraisal cycle so that there are no surprises when the formal appraisal takes place. Using frequent, informal feedback allows minor issues to be addressed promptly rather than growing into more serious ones over the passage of time. The final factor within the managerial systems practices component is supervisors must be motivated to carry out effective appraisals. This is best accomplished when the supervisors themselves are given effective appraisals by their manager because it sets a good example of how appraisal should be done and it indicates the importance of appraisal in the organization.

The third and final component of an effective performance appraisal system describes organizational support of the appraisal system (Longenecker & Fink, 1999). The first factor is performance ratings must be linked to organizational rewards. Greater rewards should be linked to superior job performance because this increases the motivation of the employees to perform. If this link is absent, employees will tend to perform only to minimum standards. A second factor is appraisal systems must be supported and demonstrated by the top administration. This can be accomplished by administrators giving effective appraisals themselves, and by supervisors and employees communicating about appraisal through memos, organizational newsletters, and testimonials. A final factor is appraisal systems need continuing systems review and changes/improvements to ensure that procedures are being followed correctly and are effective. This could be accomplished by measuring the acceptance and trust of the system by the employees, comparing the relationship between performance and rewards, and reviewing the consistency of implementation of policies and procedures across all departments and locations. Each of these three aforementioned critical components serves to encourage effective appraisal practices by the individual managers who ultimately determine the overall effectiveness of most appraisal systems.

Challenges of Performance Appraisal

Supervisors and employees generally have ambivalent attitudes, at best, toward performance appraisal (Cederblom & Pernerl, 2002). Although most would recognize the perceived benefit, in principle, of documenting, communicating, and setting goals in areas of performance, many are also frustrated concerning the actual benefit received from performance appraisal in their organizations. The benefits and rewards of performance appraisal appear to be often overstated (Longenecker & Nykodym, 1996). Nickols (2007) suggests that “the typical performance appraisal system devours staggering amounts of time and energy, depresses and demotivates people, destroys trust and teamwork and, adding insult to injury, it delivers little demonstrable value at great cost” (p. 13). The findings of several studies addressing the challenges of performance appraisal and the consequences of performance appraisal that is not done well are summarized below. Oberg (1972) mentions several pitfalls that are common to performance appraisal systems: (a) they demand too much from supervisors, (b) standards and ratings vary widely and sometimes unfairly, (c) personal values and bias can replace organizational standards, (d) employees may not know how they are rated due to lack of communication, (e) the validity of ratings is reduced by supervisory resistance to give the ratings - particularly negative ratings, (f) negative feedback can demotivate employees, and (g) they interfere with the more constructive coaching relationship that should exist between superiors and their employees. Bretz, Milkovich, and Read (1992) found that organizations continue to do things that undermine the effectiveness of the appraisal process. Little time is spent on the appraisal process, raters are not trained and are not held accountable, and the employee’s role in the process is overlooked along with potentially valuable sources of performance information from the employee, peers, and subordinates.

The person who arguably had the most influence in shaping the view that performance appraisal was not an effective tool to lead and manage organizations was Deming (1986) in his book *Out of the Crisis*. He contends that performance appraisal has significant negative drawbacks for organizations and he urges organizations not to use individual performance appraisal but rather evaluate the performance of a unit or department instead. He further stated that most common cause for error is found within organizational systems rather than with the individuals within the organization. Deming (1986) suggested that there is a normal distribution of employee performance within an organization with 95% of all organizational employees working for the success of the organization. The remaining 5% of all employees have serious problems and difficulties. A disciple of Deming, Peter Scholtes, went so far as to say that performance appraisal, at best, does not work, and in the worst scenario, it can damage morale within the organization (Scholtes, 1993 as cited in Rasch, 2004). Lewis and Smith (1994) paraphrased relevant Deming principles as they would apply to higher education as follows: "Eliminate performance standards (quotas) for faculty, administration, staff and students (e.g. raise test scores by 10%, lower dropout rate by 15%)."

Eliminate management by numbers and numerical goals. Substitute leadership." They also said "Remove barriers that rob faculty, administration, staff and students of the right to take pride in and enjoy the satisfaction of personal performance and productivity. This means, among other things, abolishing annual or merit ratings and management by objectives" (p. 101). It is interesting to note that while Deming's ideas on performance appraisal have received some attention in practitioner appraisal literature, they have not received any attention from researchers (Bretz et al, 1992). The notion of no individual feedback seems unrealistic because even without formal appraisal, informal feedback by team leaders and peers will most likely occur, and it could be less systematic and more subject to biases.

METHOD

Sample

The population surveyed in this study consisted of the 108 colleges and universities that are members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU). This is a unique sector in American Higher Education with an educational approach based by the Christian faith (DeJong, 1992).

Results & Discussion

A total of 90 (83.3%) of the member institutions of the CCCCU completed and returned the questionnaire to the researcher. Information concerning the size of the responding institutions, as measured by the size of the student body, is in Table 1, and as measured by the number of staff and administrators, in Table 2.

Insert Tables 1 & 2 here

The respondents to the questionnaire were asked to answer a group of eight statements concerning their performance appraisal system, using a rating scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree (see Table 3). Two of the eight statements generated a high Disagree or Strongly Disagree ranking from the respondents. For the statement that said that their performance appraisal system "demands too much time and effort from supervisors," 70.7% of the respondents either Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed with this statement. For the statement that said "performance appraisals interfere with the more constructive coaching relationship that should exist between a supervisor and his/her staff," 77.3% of the respondents either Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed. Four of the statements generated a Strongly Agree or Agree response that was over 50%. They included (a) standards and ratings vary widely and sometimes unfairly from supervisor to supervisor, (b) the supervisor's personal values and bias can replace organizational standards in the evaluation process, (c) the validity of the ratings is reduced by supervisory resistance to give the ratings, particularly negative ratings, and (d) the performance appraisal system is periodically reviewed and changed to insure its effectiveness. Each of the eight statements had a rating in the response category of Neither Agree or Disagree between 17.3% and 25.3%, indicating that these respondents were either unsure or did not know how to rank that statement for their institution.

Insert Table 3 here

Data summarizing the responses to the question whether or not the leadership of the institution supported and encouraged the use of performance appraisal appear on Table 4. Ninety-three percent of the respondents indicated that they Strongly Agreed or Somewhat Agreed that the use of performance appraisal was supported and encouraged by their leadership. There were only three respondents (3.9%) who indicated they Somewhat Disagreed with the above statement and two respondents (2.6%) who Strongly Disagreed with the statement.

Insert Table 4 here

The results of questions concerning the sufficiency of training provided to supervisors to give effective performance appraisal were mixed (see Table 5). Fifty-three percent of the respondents said that there was not sufficient training provided to supervisors, while 38.2% said that the training was sufficient and 6.6% said it was more than sufficient.

Insert Table 5 here

When a supervisor did not complete a performance appraisal on time, 73.7% of the respondents said that the supervisor was notified by management and was asked to complete the review (see Table 6). However, 52.6% of the respondents said that there was no action taken directly with the supervisor by management when appraisals were not completed on a timely basis, and some appraisals were never completed. To further explore this issue, respondents were asked if supervisors' future performance appraisals were negatively impacted if the supervisors did not complete the appraisals for their staff. Only 26.3% responded "yes" to this question.

CONCLUSION

A challenge or pitfall in using a performance appraisal system is lack of leadership support for the process. Leadership refers to the top office in the university or college—The Office of the President. Strong support by leadership for the appraisal process is needed to help make the process beneficial. In the current study, 93.7% of the respondents said the leadership of their institution supported and encouraged the performance appraisal system at their college. If the responses to these questions are viewed in isolation, it would appear that there was very strong leadership support. However, the responses to two additional questions seemed to at least partially contradict this result.

Another question asked if the amount of training provided to supervisors was sufficient. Fifty-three percent of the respondents said that the training was not sufficient, and an additional 2.6% said there was no training given. It is difficult to accept the conclusion that performance appraisal is supported and encouraged by the leadership of these colleges and universities when over 55% of the institutions provide either little or no training for the supervisors. It could be possible that support was in word only, but not backed up by commitment of time and financial resources. Finally, there was also strong support in the study for the statements that standards and ratings vary widely and sometimes unfairly from supervisor to supervisor, that the supervisor's personal values and bias can replace organizational standards in the evaluation process, and that the validity of the ratings is reduced by supervisory resistance to give ratings, particularly negative ratings. This is another argument for supporting the need for support from the leadership of the institution as well as providing sufficient training for the supervisors, and by allowing more time for the appraisal process.

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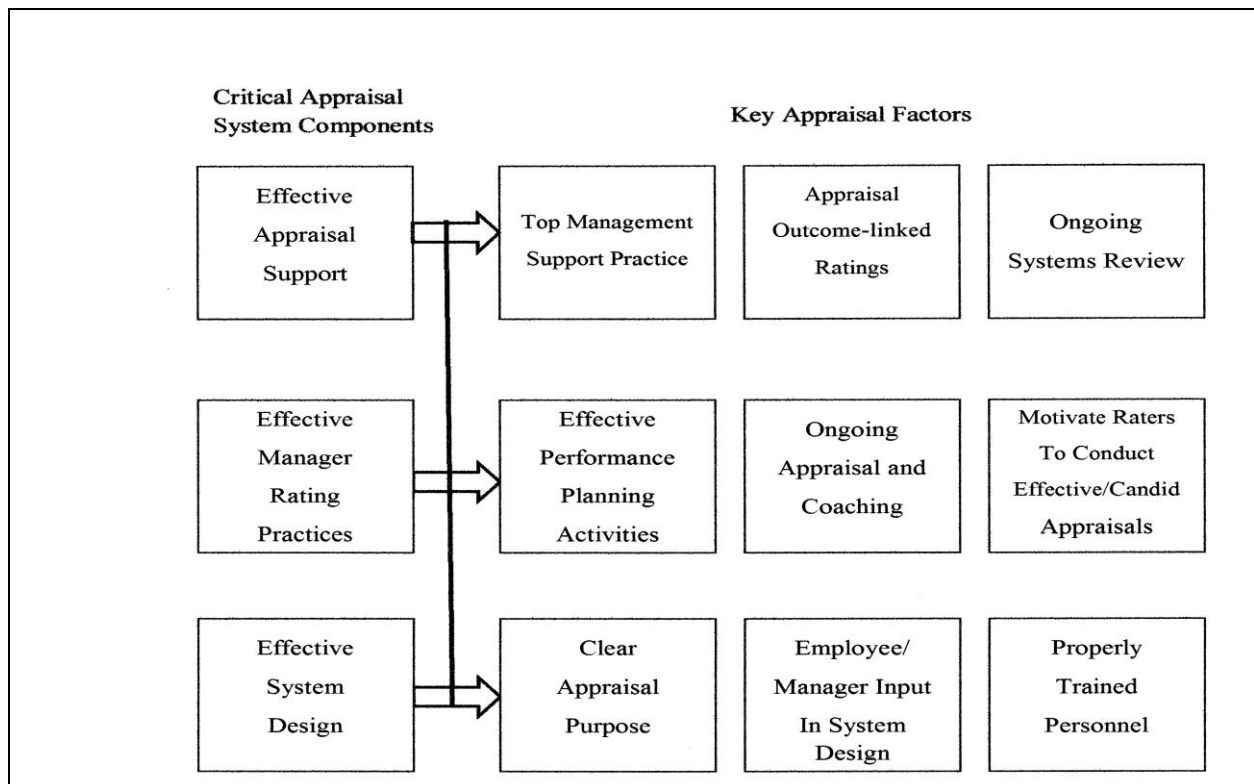
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Figure 1. A Systems Approach to Effective Appraisals



Note: From "Creating effective performance appraisals," by C. O. Longenecker and L.S. Fink, 1999, *Industrial Management*, 41(5), 18. Reprinted with permission of C. O. Longenecker.

Table 1: Number of Students at Responding Institutions

How many total undergraduate and graduate students does your institution have?		
Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
Less than 1,000 students	21.6%	19
Between 1,000 and 2,000 students	35.2%	31
Between 2,000 and 3,000 students	21.6%	19
More than 3,000 students	21.6%	19
<i>answered question</i>		88

Note: Two institutions did not respond to this question.

Table 2: Number of Staff and Administrators at Responding Institutions

How many staff and administrators (i.e. all employees excluding faculty) does your institution have?		
Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
Less than 200	40.9%	36
Between 200 and 600	54.5%	48
Between 600 and 1,000	4.5%	4
More than 1,000	0.0%	0
<i>answered question</i>		88

Note: Two institutions did not respond to this question.

Table 3: Challenges and Pitfalls of Performance Appraisal System

Please rate the following statements about your performance appraisal system by marking one circle for each statement.						
Answer Options	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Response Count
It demands too much time and effort from supervisors.	1	7	14	44	9	75
Standards and ratings vary widely and sometimes unfairly from supervisor to supervisor.	3	39	16	13	4	75
The supervisor's personal values and bias can replace organizational standards in the evaluation process.	4	41	16	13	1	75
The validity of the ratings is reduced by supervisory resistance to give the ratings, particularly negative ratings.	6	39	14	12	4	75
Negative feedback can demotivate an employee.	4	26	19	25	1	75
Performance appraisals interfere with the more constructive coaching relationship that should exist between a supervisor and his/her staff.	0	4	13	51	7	75
Managers and staff provide input in the design, development, and choice of criteria used in the appraisal.	5	29	15	24	2	75
The performance appraisal system is periodically reviewed and changed to insure its effectiveness.	9	35	17	13	1	75

Note: One respondent did not respond to this question.

Table 4: Support by Leadership of the Institution

The use of performance appraisal is supported and encouraged by the leadership of your institution.

Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
Strongly agree	51.3%	39
Somewhat agree	42.1%	32
Somewhat disagree	3.9%	3
Strongly disagree	2.6%	2
<i>answered question</i>		76

Table 5: Training Provided to Supervisors

The amount of training provided supervisors in your institution to give effective performance appraisal is:

Answer Options	Response %	Response Count
More than sufficient	6.6%	5
Sufficient	38.2%	29
Not sufficient	52.6%	40
None	2.6%	2
<i>answered question</i>		76

Table 6: Non-completion of Performance Appraisal by Supervisor

Answer Options	Yes	No
The supervisor is notified by management and is asked to complete the review.	56 73.7%	20 26.3%
There is no action taken with the supervisor by management and some appraisals are never completed.	40 52.6%	36 47.4%
This will negatively impact the future performance appraisal of the supervisor.	20 26.3%	56 73.7%
<i>answered question</i>	76	